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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

QUEEN

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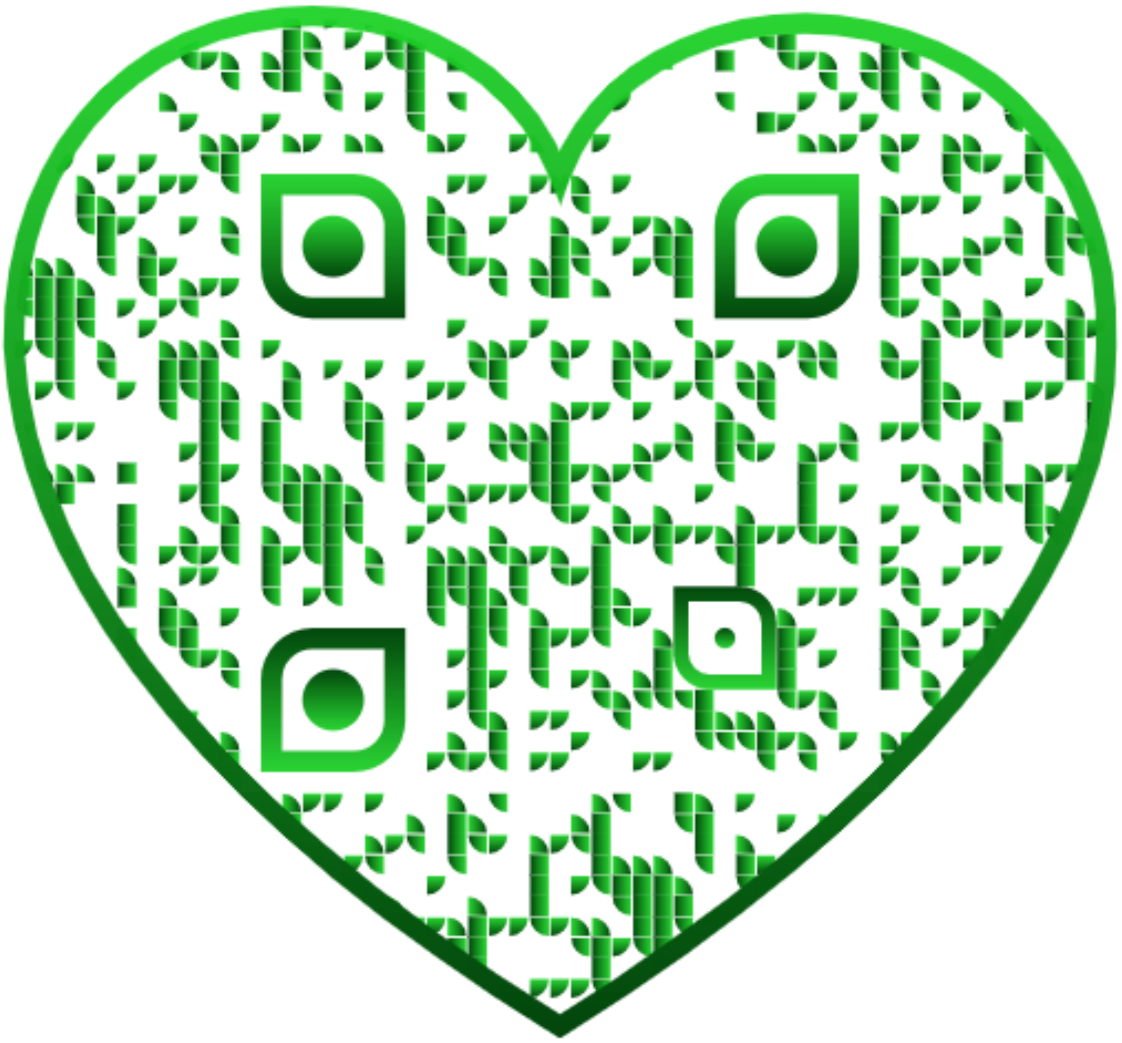

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Welcome...

It's been my utter pleasure in recent years to have interviewed the legendary Queen guitarist Brian May, the man you see on this very cover, on several occasions. Previously, Brian has topped *Total Guitar* polls such as the greatest guitarist and the greatest solo. There's no public accolade this month, but Brian and I did get together to chew the fat and discuss 13 of Team TG's favourite Queen songs. As ever, Brian's insight is fascinating – and we've printed almost every word of the interview, occupying a huge 20 pages!

If there's one thing I think every guitarist can take away from this feature, it's that Brian, arguably the most famous guitarist alive today, and a man who has been rocking some of the Queen repertoire for over 50 years, still finds one or two of those classic anthems a challenge.

So what? Well, for one, it tells us that regular practice is vital, whatever level you're at. Second, I get the impression that these days Brian plays, and, in fact, runs the whole Queen + Adam Lambert machine, for pleasure. A worthy reminder to us all, I feel, that the pure enjoyment of playing is why we first picked up the instrument and that we should continue to seek that buzz.

Hopefully after this long read you'll be feeling inspired to play – and we've accompanied our feature with bespoke technique lessons on those 13 songs, plus you'll find in-depth video lessons on how to play three classic Queen riffs. And, with all the usual lessons, songs, features and reviews, there's plenty to get your teeth into.

Enjoy the issue, and I'll see you next month!

Chris Bird Editor

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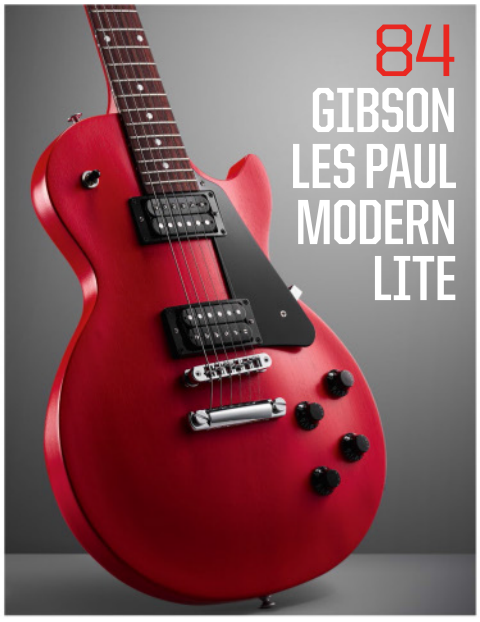

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Words Paul Elliott
Photo David Tan/Shinko Music/Getty

KING EDWARD

40 years ago this month, Van Halen had their first and only US number one single with *Jump*. Oddly, for a band built around the greatest rock guitarist of his generation, it was a song powered by a synthesizer riff. Equally notable was the fact the band's album *1984* would also have made it to the top were it not for Michael Jackson's *Thriller* – on which Eddie Van Halen had played the stinging solo for *Beat It*. But elsewhere on *1984* there was plenty of Eddie's customary guitar pyrotechnics in songs such as *Panama*, *Hot For Teacher*, *Drop Dead Legs*, *Girl Gone Bad* and *House Of Pain* – the latter originally written and recorded in demo form before the release of the band's explosive, game-changing debut album in 1978.

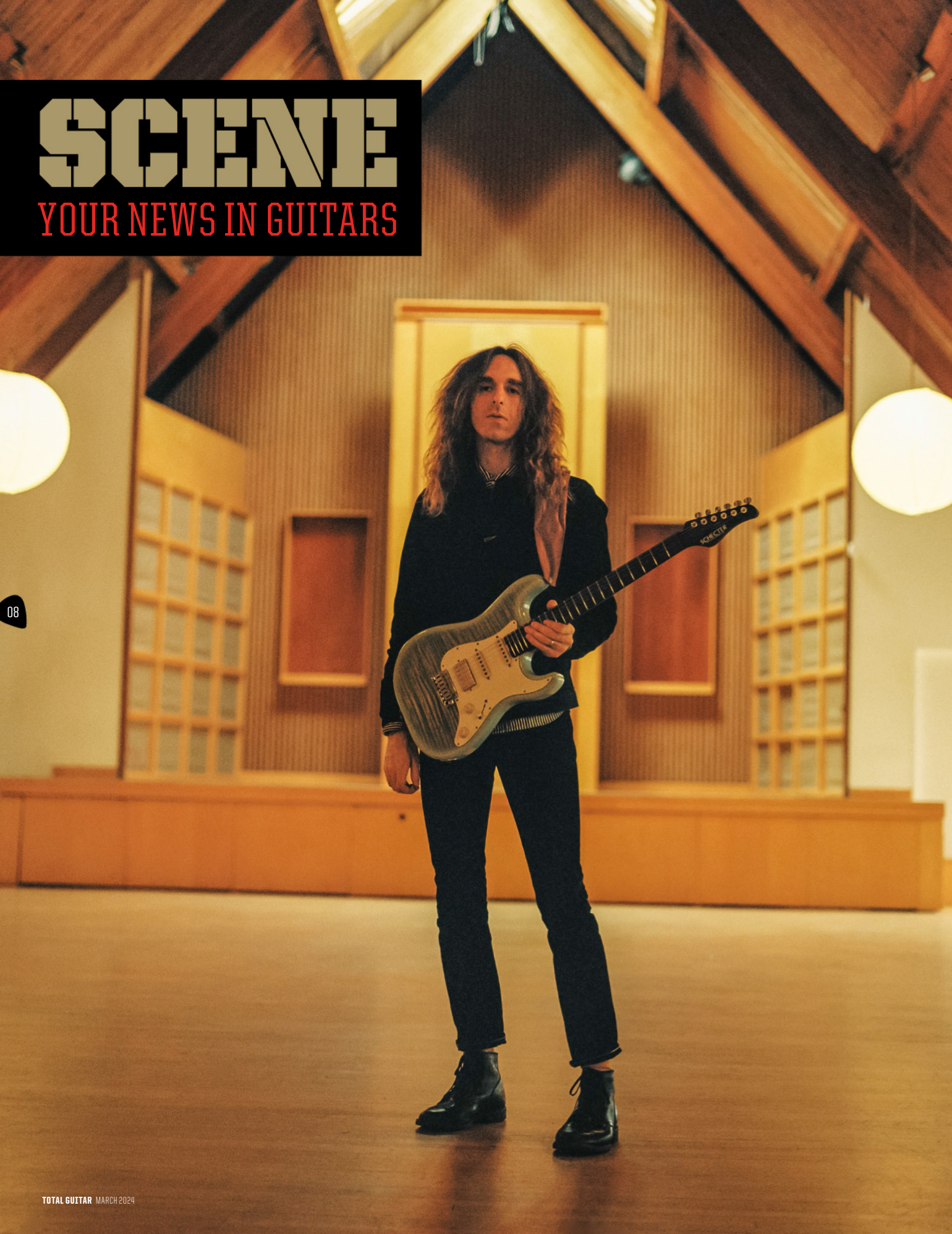
Eddie's *1984* tone was distinct from his early sound, but he used largely the same gear. The original Frankenstrat was mostly retired for this album in favour of the banana-headstocked Kramer 5150, but the magic Marshall Plexi was still his only amp. Eddie did use his Eventide harmoniser on every song, but it was not as prominent as it would become on later albums. "I used it mostly to split my guitar signal so it came out of both sides," he commented.

The guitars were single-tracked with few overdubs, making it almost unique among rock albums of the time. And there was another unusual aspect to *1984*, as explained in a recent TG interview by Joe Satriani, who is now set to play some of the landmark tracks from the album when he tours this year with former Van Halen members Sammy Hagar and Michael Anthony, plus drummer Jason Bonham.

"What makes this album so interesting is the fact that there are guitars that are not totally in tune," Joe said. "But," he added with a laugh, "good luck trying to get as good a take as that!"

SCENE

YOUR NEWS IN GUITARS



ALBUM

"MY GUITAR IS MORE LIKE THE ICING ON THE CAKE"

NICK JOHNSTON: THE SIX-STRING VIRTUOSO WHO WRITES ON PIANO

Nick Johnston has never sounded more poetic than on his latest solo album *Child Of Bliss* – its title the English translation of his wife's name. He's blurring the lines between progressive rock, blues and jazz as he so often has done in the past, but this time boiling his ideas down to their core ingredients. The man whose name appears on Schecter's best-selling artist model says he's never felt this content in creativity and tone…

Your instrumental music has always had a vocal-like quality to it, but this latest work feels like your most hook-laden yet…
A lot of the solos have no rhythm guitar behind them, just to let things breathe! But that can be a scary place to be. It's not me trying to show what I've been practising but rather what I'm hearing. And, on top of that, I'm just going straight into the amp! Certain things came out because I felt so comfortable. I surprised myself, especially when playing over strange chord changes. I couldn't explain it but I was definitely liking it! It felt like I was unshackled. It was exciting to see where it all went. There are a couple of songs like *Memento Vivere*, specifically the leads in that first break, where I didn't even know what I was playing!

Some of those chord changes you speak of really catch the listener off-guard.
That comes from writing at the piano. When you take away the guitar, your usual tricks and licks are gone. There is no comfort zone. I find my guitar lives these days more like the icing on the cake. Some of the songs feel like they have nothing to do with guitar! I made a whole bunch of records that were all about my playing. Because I'm not listening to guitar music these days, I don't really want to write it. It's a 'you are what you eat' kinda thing, I guess. My favourite songwriter is Pat Metheny and he's talked about it too, choosing to mainly compose on piano. You can really hear someone's sense of harmony when you pull the shapes away.

You have S-style and T-style signature models through Schecter, who you've been with for nearly 10 years. Which exact one are we hearing?
It's a newish S-style with the cracked red finish. That's been my main guitar for the last few years. I've used Gibsons and Fenders in the past, but, honestly, nothing compares to how good my signatures sound. It's almost a joke! And for some reason this Custom Shop red model wins the battle every time.

You've been posting a lot of footage with your Orange OR-30 recently. Was that the main amp?
I used around four heads – the Orange, a Marshall Plexi, a Mesa and a Friedman. Instead of adding EQ, we used different mics. If I wanted more top end, we'd just blend in a little more of whatever mic had that sound. It's a really layered sound with a lot of overtones and musical feedback. It was actually such an easy album to record, I've never felt so at ease with my tone. And there were no pedals, maybe a Uni-Vibe a couple of times; but to be honest, it was just one guitar straight into an amp.
Amit Sharma

GUITAR

LTD ROYAL SHIVA

We're suckers for a Silverburst finish here at TG, and a man whose sentiments match our own is Mastodon's Bill Kelliher. For 2024, LTD has made a production version of Kelliher's one-off ESP Custom Shop model by adding an LTD version to its catalogue (priced £2,295). The mahogany rock machine is capped with maple, and that 'burst extends to the back of the body and neck. It's loaded with a pair of Bill's own Mojotone Hellbender humbuckers, and while there's just one volume and tone control, they both feature pull switches to split the coils of each pickup individually. Elsewhere, it's got a 25"-scale Macassar ebony fingerboard with mother-of-pearl block inlays and a TonePros TOM bridge.

GUITAR

CHARVEL PRO-MOD RELIC SAN DIMAS STYLE 1

We'll let you in on a little open secret… Charvel is part of the Fender family. As such, it's fair to imagine that a few family secrets get passed down, too. So, feast your eyes on this, the all-new Charvel Pro Mod San Dimas Style 1. Yes, it's an alder body with a bolt-on neck, and, yes, it's a doublecut, but there isn't a single-coil or Sunburst finish in sight. Instead, Charvel is showing us what an '80s hot-rodder looks like once the make-up's running and the Lycra is frayed.

It comes in three distressed finishes: Black, White and Orange, with shred-friendly features including Seymour Duncan '59/JB humbuckers, a Floyd Rose 1000 series trem and a 25-inch-scale, 12"-16" compound radius pau ferro fingerboard. It'll set you back £1,259.

PREAMP

KEMPER PROFILER PLAYER

A Kemper that lives on your pedalboard? Yep! The Profiler Player finally answers the wishlists of amp-free guitar players with a more compact and affordable (£619) route into Kemper ownership. It can read any existing Kemper-compatible amp profile, and connects wirelessly to the Kemper Rig Manager app for editing and setting-up of your patches. There's effects, too, with 136 settings trickled down from the full Kemper Profiler, and these can be selected in four FX blocks. On the front panel, there's real-time control for gain, EQ, FX levels Rig level, and a master volume, and Kemper has been generous with the outputs too with an XLR direct out, stereo monitor output and headphone socket, plus a footswitch input for hooking up an expression pedal. Keep your eyes peeled for a review soon!

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Words Stuart Williams
Photography Phil Barker

BIG MT

Lunchtime is over, say hello to Mark Tremonti's new 100-watt signature amp

Back in 2018, we sat down with Mark Tremonti at the NAMM Show for a guided tour of his first signature amp, the PRS MT15. While the high-gain lunchbox was Mark's first signature amp, it seems that he's reversing the tradition of 'big amp first, then smaller derivative second', because now Tremonti and PRS have scaled-up the MT15's DNA with a fire-breathing 100-watt head: the PRS MT100 (£1,599).

Tremonti's new arena-ready amp head packs three channels of valve tone into a surprisingly simple format. There's the Clean channel ("pristine and chimey"), Gain channel ("lush heavy tones with massive bass that is never muddy") and the Overdrive channel (modelled after "one of Tremonti's favourite personal amps" – that'll be a Dumble-style tone, then).

All of the controls are laid out in a clean, linear fashion with gain, volume, three-band EQ and presence controls for each channel, and inside there are eight 12AX7 valves powering the preamp sections, while the output stage is handled by four 6L6 power valves.

The simplicity is continued around the back, with speaker outputs, a footswitch socket and effects loop, plus there's biasing jacks for easy calibration. They're not hitting these shores just yet, but by the time you read this you'll only have to wait a few weeks.

UP CLOSE

Channels

The Clean and Gain channels will be familiar to fans of Mark's PRS MT15, but here they're joined by a new Overdrive channel based on one of Mark's favourites.

Valves

There should be gain on-tap courtesy of eight 12AX7 valves in the preamp, and these are pumped through four 6L6 power valves in the output stage for huge headroom and power.

Controls

No sharing here – the control set for each channel is equally well stocked, and we love the uncluttered layout, too.

HOW TO

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN
- ✔ Drop B♭ tuning
- ✔ Powerchords
- ✔ Downstrokes

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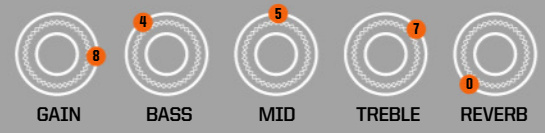
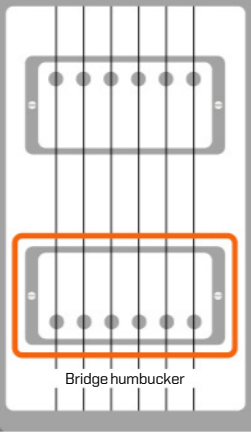
RIFF OF THE MONTH

GET THE TONE

CHANNEL DISTORTION





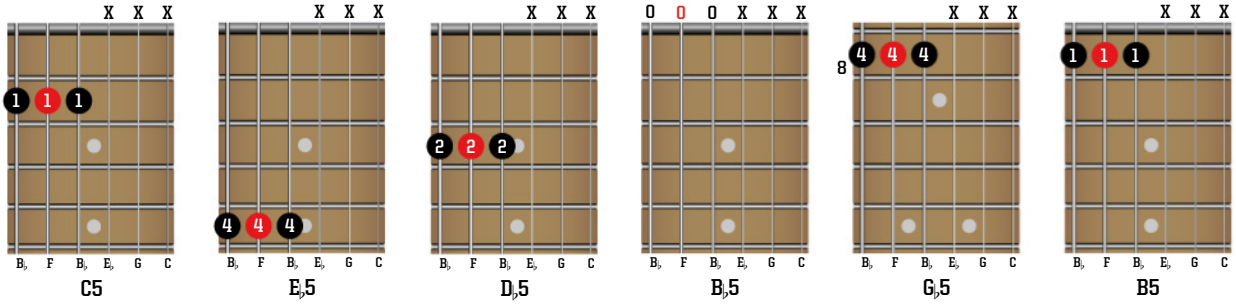
The guitars are tuned down to drop B♭, which is (B♭ F B♭ E♭ G C) so you may need to use heavier strings such as 11-52 for better tuning stability. Lee has been using a Jackson King V for live performances of this track and he favours a Marshall JCM800 boosted with a Tube Screamer-type overdrive pedal in front of the amp. For the single-note section at beginning of the riff there is an octave pitch-shifter and a phaser-type effect, but the powerchord parts are all played without effects.

BRING ME THE HORIZON

Kool-Aid

The latest single from BMTH's forthcoming album *Post Human: Nex Gen* features a heavy, drop B♭-tuned riff from guitarist Lee Malia. The intro kicks off as a heavily effected single-note line played on the open sixth string and at the 2nd, 3rd and 5th frets. On the second time through you'll be switching to powerchords, each played on the lowest three strings. The riff stays mainly on the 2nd and 5th frets, played with first and fourth fingers, so it's best to stay in this position where possible and only move out of position to play the variations at the 8th and 1st frets. To give each chord a consistent tone and attack, use downstrokes throughout while leting your hand move from the wrist and forearm in a relaxed motion. Strike the strings with enough force to give each chord a bright attack, but be careful not to hit too hard as this can make the strings sound sharp. To learn the riff accurately be sure to watch our video demo which is played at half speed for you.

CHEAT SHEET...
Appears at: 0:00-0:38
Tempo: 150bpm
Key/scale: C Locrian
Main techniques: Powerchords, downstrokes, palm-muting



The lowest three strings are tuned to an open B♭5 powerchord, so the chords are easy to play - just use one finger barred across the three strings. Most of the notes and chords belong to the dark sounding C Locrian mode (notes: C D♭ E♭ F G♭ A♭ B♭; intervals: 1 ♭2 ♭3 4 ♭5 ♭6 ♭7), but there is also a B5 powerchord at the 1st fret which is outside of the Locrian mode.

Photo Getty

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Doug Aldrich - The Dead Daisies

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LEVEL
Think of this more as a volume control, with its principal effect being how much signal is delivered to your amp, with less timbral effect from the pedal.

TONE
This is best understood as functioning like a high-pass filter, with most treble content removed when it's fully anti-clockwise.

OVERDRIVE

Get your guitar talking with this mainstay of classic rock pedalboards the world over

The general difference between an overdrive and a distortion is that overdrives use soft-clipping diodes, usually in the feedback loop of one of their op-amp stages, while distortions use hard-clipping, usually after the amp stages. Most of the time, this means overdrives sound smoother, while distortion pedals are more extreme. However, this isn't a hard and fast rule. Many overdrives can put out a similar level of clipping to distortions when dimed.

The Tube Screamer is the archetypal overdrive, with the original, and most classic version, the TS808, even saying 'Overdrive' on its gain control. Now, this isn't the origin of the term – that honour belongs to the Boss OD-1 Over Drive, released in 1977. Although the Tube Screamer borrows from that circuit, it differs in symmetrical clipping, and the addition of a tone control. Despite the OD-1 coming first, the Screamer is the more feted, and no doubt the more copied.

Today, you can look back at a long family tree of op-amp overdrives and trace most of them back to the lean, green overdrive machine released in 1979.

Alex Lynham

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Unsure whether you're after a TS808, TS9 or TS10? How about one of the many after-market mods? The Bonsai simplifies all this. As many of the part differences are relatively minor, the Bonsai rolls nine different Tube Screamer voicings into a single pedal. There's all the major iterations of the Screamer, plus Keeley and JHS mods, and even a OD-1 mode, covering off the original Boss Over Drive.

MAXON OD808

£109

Maxon were the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) that produced the Tube Screamer for Ibanez. Ibanez reportedly ended the partnership in the early 2000s as Maxon's patents expired. This has resulted in Maxon marketing Tube Screamers under their own brand. Maxon still use vintage-correct components, making this one of the most technically accurate Screamers on the market..

MOOER GREEN MILE

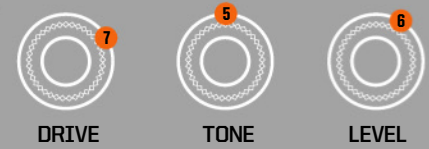
£52

If you're tight on pedalboard real estate then the Mooer Green Mile is worth a look. The hot/warm switch takes the tone profile between TS9 and TS808. As a result you're getting two for one in this diminutive enclosure. However, it is worth noting that Ibanez's very cute TS Mini is only slightly more expensive, even if it is limited to a single mode.

RECOMMENDED SETTINGS

BIG TREBLE BOOST

A common use for the TS is as a boost with the gain all the way down. Into a low-wattage amp this can deliver a kick for dirty blues licks. Likewise, many tech-metal players use one as a boost, too. Into the gain channel of a high-gain head, a 'Screamer will compress the input signal, bring forward the mids and push the amp into greater saturation.



CRUNCHY GRUNGE

The TS can deliver thick tones ideal for chords. The tone setting will depend on your amp setup, but start here, and then roll back the tone control to taste. Controlling the treble will allow you to increase the gain more than you would otherwise, for a more saturated distortion sound. With the level up, this should gel nicely with power tube saturation from your amp.

FAT STACK

The TS is commonly stacked with other gain pedals. When stacking, you want to run each pedal in the chain at a slightly lower gain level than you would otherwise. In the case of this stack, the TS is used to compress a Big Muff in front of it, and bring the mids forward for a flatter EQ profile. Turn the fuzz gain all the way up, then increase the Tube Screamer gain.

Words Amit Sharma **Portrait** Andy Ford

"EXTREME MUSIC LENDS ITSELF WELL TO EXPERIMENTAL ARRANGEMENTS"

In an extraordinary double album, former Emperor guitarist **Ihsahn** delivers new material in two contrasting versions: metal and orchestral. "It was a perfect match," he says, "because my guitar had the same tuning as the cellos!"

Heavy metal and classical music may appear to be diametrically opposed, but there's a lot to be said about the shared kinship between them. And few understand this as well as Norwegian musician Vegard Sverre Tveitan – the man better known as Ihsahn to his army of fans around the world.

As the founding singer/guitarist of Emperor, whose 1994 debut *In The Nightside Eclipse* is widely considered to be ground zero for symphonic black metal, he was able to layer orchestral sophistication into some of the most twisted noises ever conceived by the human mind, daring to delve deep into the baroque to further intensify the gothic qualities within his own compositions.

In 2006 he embarked on a solo career which has seen him thrive in the progressive leftfield, pairing extended range guitars with synths, soundscapes and even saxophones. On his new self-titled double concept album, however, he's revisiting some of the musical concepts that kickstarted a new wave of cinematic extreme metal, once again finding ways to link the contrasting worlds of six-string aggression and classical finesse. The dualities at play are further emphasised by the two versions of each track – one led by distorted guitars and another reimagined in full orchestral form. Bearing similarities to the final Emperor album, 2001 masterpiece *Prometheus: The Discipline Of Fire & Demise*, it's undoubtedly one of the finest metal releases you'll hear this year.

You grew up worshipping heavy metal acts such as Iron Maiden and King Diamond. But where does your love for classical music come from?

I really appreciated the musical language and use of harmony on the soundtracks I grew up with. It was composers like Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams and Bernard Herrmann. I loved all that stuff, which is why I put keyboards into my music from the early days. And though it's also elevated proportionally to my experiences in adult life, this new album is me stylistically going back to my roots and basic core elements. If you boil it down, it's a black metal band with all the guitars, blastbeats and screaming plus a traditional symphony orchestra.

BLUE MURDER
"The Mint Blue finish is the colour of Hannibal Lecter's couch!"

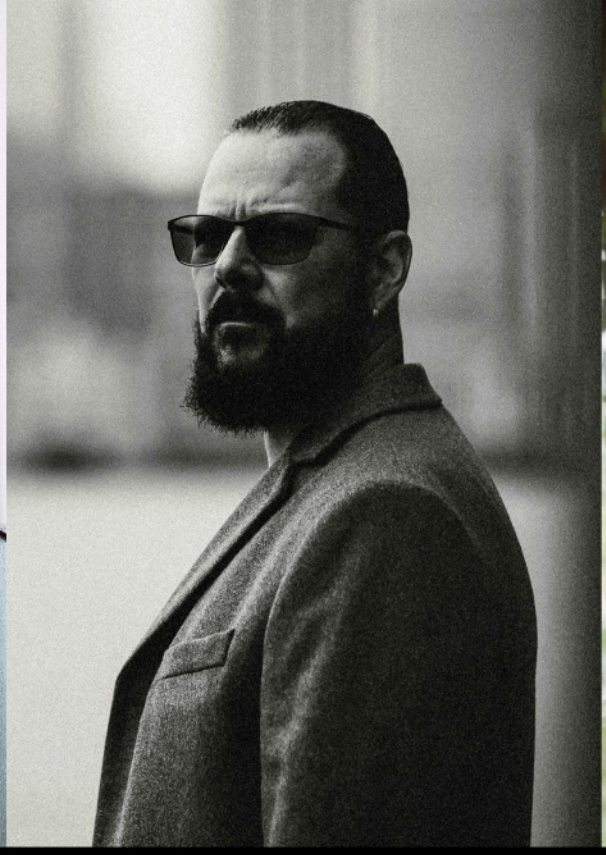
Much of your discography proves that metal and classical have a lot more in common than just Ritchie Blackmore, Yngwie Malmsteen and the harmonic minor scale...
Exactly. I find they go together very well because they try to achieve a lot of the same energy and emotion. There's a lot of classical music that's very serious, for instance. And I'm not even trying to intellectualise this, because my gateway into orchestral music was through horror movies! I found the eerie atmospheres of those scores came from the same kind of emotional landscape as a lot of metal – a lot of dark textures and minor stuff. So that's why I ended up doing two versions of this album. It's pretty much exactly the same music arranged and performed through different ensembles, but both versions are trying to achieve the same thing.

The chord progressions feel unpredictable, which – again – can be said of many a classical piece...
I had some dogmas and rules going into this, like writing the whole album without any traditional diatonic chord progressions. Instead I focused on all the harmonic colours I associate with those older soundtracks, like outside scales and Messiaen modes. They sound so eerie. I didn't have much of an understanding of it early on because I'm self-taught and not big on theory, but I started to look into what system Jerry Goldsmith was using to get these colours. Extreme music lends itself well to experimental arrangements. You don't need big catchy choruses. You can be more adventurous, I guess.

Extreme metal is well-known for being technically demanding. You recently shared a play-through of new track *Pilgrimage To Oblivion* and it's quite relentless on the alternate picking front...
I've just started rehearsing for the live shows and I'm now realising it's really hard! Most of it written as a piano short score and then I would arrange it from there. And because it's not diatonic, I have no muscle memory for this sh*t. Some of the voicings and progressions are insane. They make no sense from a traditional guitar playing perspective. I do sometimes end up regretting writing this stuff because later I have to play it and sing at the same time. *Pilgrimage To Oblivion* is so fast!

What kind of exercises helped you get up to those speeds?
What helped was playing that way… a lot! When I started out, it was mainly fast stuff. You can hear it on early Emperor albums like *In The Nightside Eclipse* and Anthems *To The Welkin At Dusk*. But it's different these days – we make records in a studio and then have to teach ourselves how to play it live. Back then, the songs came from us being in a rehearsal space playing these songs over and over again. One thing I've noticed is that I have a very loose wrist, especially when I'm strumming chords. It's a shaking motion and I fan out my fingers almost like a pendulum. I tilt my wrist downwards, because dangling it that way is a much easier movement than the typical writing motion which is more sideways. I also tilt my pick forwards, so it slants down and doesn't get caught in the strings. Though with single notes it's less pronounced because I need to dampen the other strings.

You've been using Aristides guitars since 2016 – a boutique Dutch company best-known for using their own 'Arium' composite instead of conventional body woods like mahogany, ash and alder...
They have a patented material to simulate a perfectly sustaining piece of wood. It's so consistent. I guess it works differently for other people – some might enjoy the excitement of playing and sounding differently on a Strat compared to a Les Paul or a chunky neck Tele. I like to mix and match instruments but have my playing style remain exactly the same. And in terms of practicality, as a touring musician, I love how Aristides instruments are not affected by temperature or humidity. I can fly to Japan and when I take my guitars out of the cases, they're all in tune and play exactly how they did at home. They're an amazing company. I have all of their models, from the classic Telecaster- and PRS-style ones to other sixes and sevens, plus eights with slanted frets.



Ergonomics is another bonus. I always feel at home. Even the ones with extra strings feel as comfortable as a regular guitar. I love the headless models. I even have one of the nine-strings!

So which one did you use most on the new recordings?

I think 90 per cent of the album was recorded with my headless six-string. It has deer antlers as inlays around the 12th fret, and its Mint Blue finish was inspired by the *Hannibal* television series, which I'm obsessed with! I've been borrowing colours from that show – that shade of blue is the colour of Hannibal Lecter's couch and I also have an Oxblood Red model that was inspired by his office! I used an eight-string on one song. Using Aristides makes trying out different pickups so much fun, because the consistency of the material is very dependable. You can really hear the quality of each pickup you wire in, it all shines through! I predominantly use Bare Knuckles, but those new headless models have Lundgren pickups, which also sound amazing. I currently have Fishman Fluences in my Tele models. This is actually my first album entirely in drop C. I've done things like drop D and drop A in the past, but I'd never done drop C, which is like an in-between range. It was a perfect match because my guitar had the same tuning as the cellos! That made it easier to imagine how everything would work together. There was a practical purpose to it.

You've used Blackstar amps a lot over the years, and we've seen you posting about plug-ins made by Neural DSP and Bogren Digital. Would we be right in guessing it was a blend of both worlds?

Yes, it was a mix of analogue and digital. I did bring out my old tube heads: there was my Blackstar Artisan 100 which is built like an old Plexi, some vintage Marshalls, the Engl Savage 120 and an Orange Tiny Terror with pedals like the [Misha Mansoor-owned] Horizon Devices stuff. One thing that was new for this album was this high-end tube amp made by MLC in Poland, which had been recently sent over. It sounded amazing so I ended up using it for nearly all the rhythm guitars. It looks very modern but has a very Marshally quality to it, with a little more oomph.

It sounds like you definitely have a lot of gear at your disposal!

I've been fortunate in having so many guitars and amps. But it was never really that practical before, getting connecting to cabinets, having to crank everything and choosing mics. But the Two Notes Captor X really helped with silently tracking my real amps. Then I'd use the Nolly GGD cab sims, mixing and matching microphones as I pleased. It sounded great and was so easy to use. For leads, I used a lot of Neural DSP technology. I tend to record my DIs with a generic sound and then put on my engineering hat for all the reamping later on. When you're one person doing everything, you don't want to be distracted by mic placements while creating. As for the chimey clean stuff and ethereal leads, I used both the Neural DSP and Bogren plug-ins. Maybe I'm getting old, but I don't like my distortion to be too dense. I like as little gain as I can get away with, because I want the definition and punch from the strings. Separation is key!

Ihsahn's self-titled album is out on February 16.

SOLITARY MAN
"When you're one person doing everything, you don't want to be distracted by mic placements while creating..."

"SOME OF THE VOICINGS AND PROGRESSIONS ARE INSANE. THEY MAKE NO SENSE FROM A TRADITIONAL GUITAR PLAYING PERSPECTIVE"

HOT DOG!
Marc with Ceramic Dog drummer Ches Smith (left) and bassist Shahzad Ismaily.

"I'M THE PRESIDENT OF OVERDUBS 'R' US!"

As one of the best session players in the business, **Marc Ribot** has recorded with Tom Waits, Robert Plant & Alison Krauss and many more. And when he's creating his own music, anything goes...

Words Andrew Daly
Photos Ebru Yildiz, Eric van den Brulle

Marc Ribot, though he doesn't think of himself as such, is a session ace. He's played sideman to Tom Waits on records such as *Rain Dogs* (1985) and *Franks Wild Years* (1987), lent a hand to *Elvis Costello* on *Spike* (1989), and Robert Plant & Alison Krauss on *Raising Sand* (2007), and even appears on the Black Keys' *Attack & Release* (2008), just to name a few among the hundreds.

Most recently, Marc has injected his angular riffage and jagged yet buttery solos into Ceramic Dog's mix, with whom he's been recording since 2008's *Party Intellectuals*. As for the latest, 2023's *Connection*, released on Knockwurst Records, it's a bit of Ribot-driven bliss, which runs the gamut of free jazz improvisation, off-the-wall, tribal rhythms, and straight-up rock and blues jams.

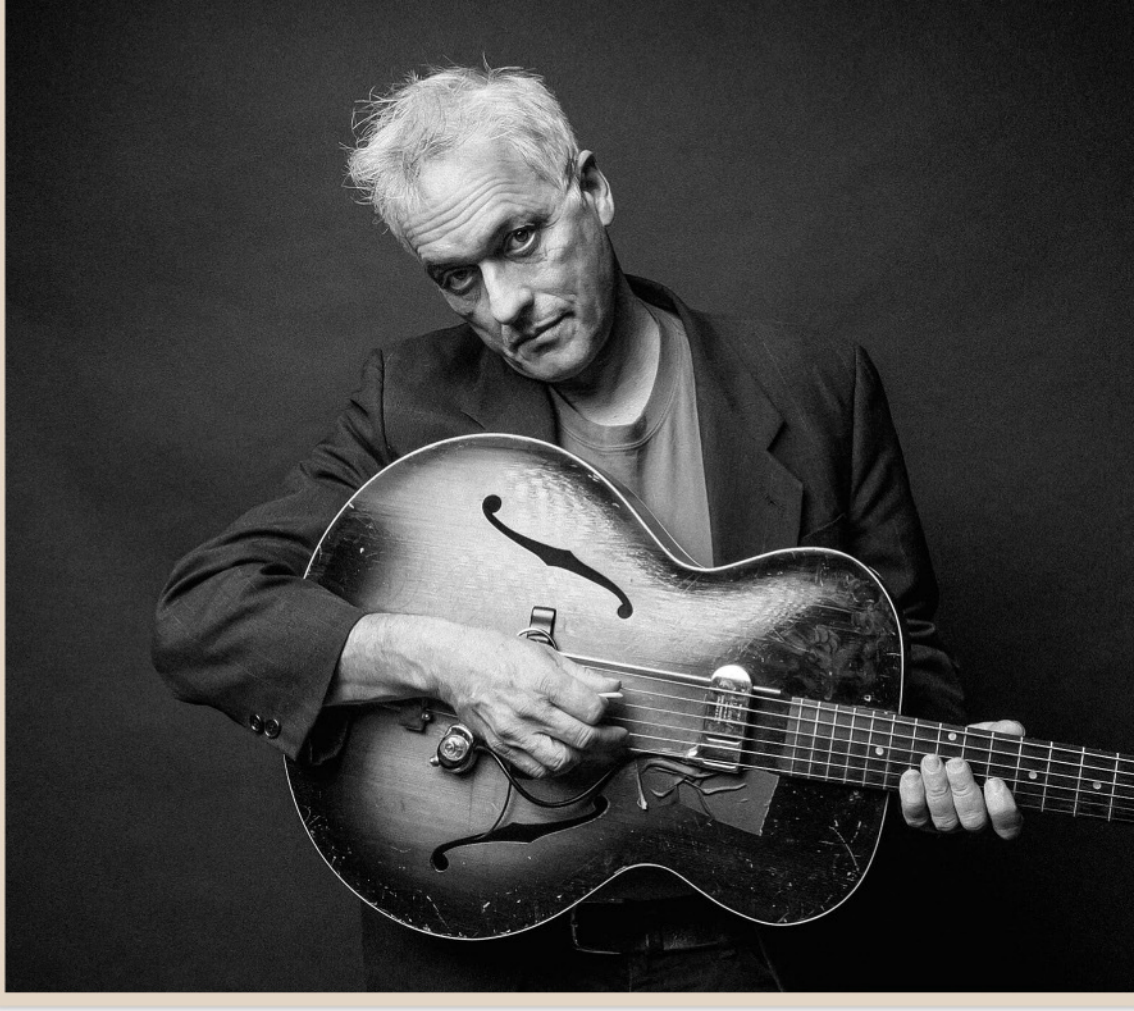
While traveling in a van en route to gig in Philadelphia in support of *Connection*, Ribot dialed in with *Total Guitar* to talk new music, working with Tom Waits, and the unique gear and approach that inspired it all...

Connection is a tour de force in genre exploration. How did you approach it?

I picked up my guitar, just like yesterday! But on this record and the touring I've been doing so far since the summer of 2023, I've mainly used my [Gibson] SG. I've regressed to my childhood in that way. It's like I'm back in my early teenage years.

What spurred you to break the SG out?

Well, you were kind of saying the record is eclectic, but to us,



we felt like it sounded like a rock album. So, I wanted access to more metal and rock sounds. It's not traditional to some, but it's our version.

Tell us about the title track *Connection*. Aside from the SG, what went into it?
That's a lot to ask of my poor memory! But I usually use an [Analog Man] King of Tone for some extra distortion. I ran that tune through that, and now that I think of it, *Connection* was recorded with my [Fender] Jaguar.

Did any other pedals play a significant role in your signal chain?
I also had a newer [EHX] Memory Man [Analog Delay], which I'm a big fan of. I like it as a preamp, even if the echo isn't a very quick slapback. I'd advise people to go with the vintage ones. But they always break during gigs, so pedals can be an expensive habit. The new ones have a titanium crystal, and are more roadworthy, but the sound of the original is unmatched.

Soldier In The Army Of Love has some pretty district flourishes. How did you come up with that?
Truthfully, I don't have a process. I sit around, and it usually takes me days to come up with anything. I'm lazy! It'll take me 10 hours to do one hour's worth of practising! But I do wind up sitting with my guitar, I'll play sh*t, and next thing you know we've got a hit record!

As far as tone goes on, what gear choices impacted things?
It's more about playing really loud, and I think I tuned down to D. I tend to use heavy strings, like 0.011s. But sometimes, and this was the case in this instance, I go with light tops and heavier bottoms, and I pair it with that King of Tone pedal. And then I ran through a [Fender] Deluxe Reverb and cranked the f*ck out of it!

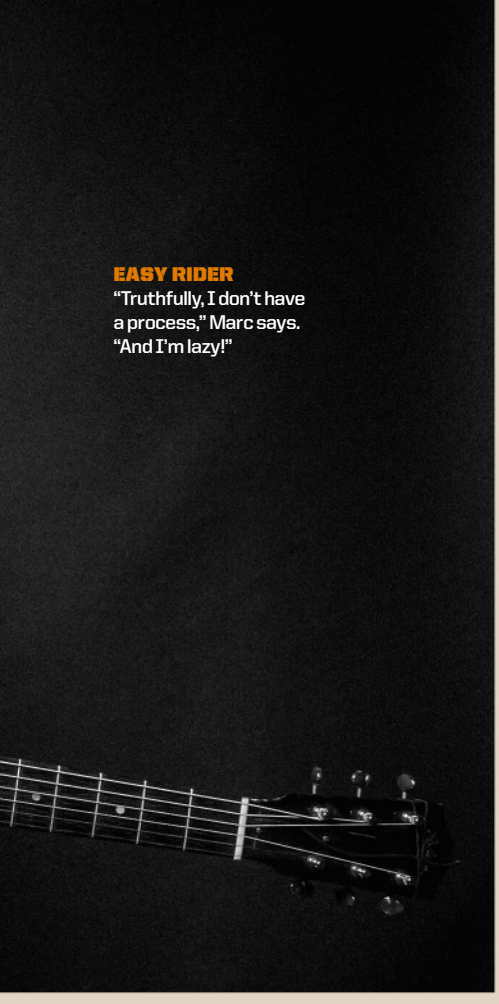
And how about your elongated solo on *Order Of Protection*, which is stunning?
Order Of Protection originally had lyrics, but we decided that it was in the best interest of society to leave the lyrics out. People don't get the concept of unreliable narrators these days, so if you say horrible, disgusting stuff, that automatically means you're horrible and disgusting, rather than trying to draw an accurate picture of a horrible and disgusting person. Anyways, it wound up as an instrumental, which made the world a better place! I approached it from a rock, blues, and jazz perspective, which I guess makes sense. With the solo, I was trying to convey the same message that the lyrics would have. I'm not sure it worked, but that was the idea of it, anyway.

How would you measure what you're doing now compared to recording *Rain Dogs* with Tom Waits?
Nothing's changed. I still go into the studio, listen to the song, catch the vibe, hear the words, and think, 'Okay, what kind of guitarist would be playing along with that? What does this need?' Sometimes, I hate it, and if I do, I'll say, 'How can I destroy it?' And if I can't destroy it, I'll think, 'How can I make this something I wouldn't laugh at?'

And what's the secret to doing what you've just said on those classic Tom Waits songs like *Clap Hands* and *Jockey Full Of Bourbon*?
With Tom, he thinks – at least, when I work with him – kind of dramatically. He thinks of the guitar as a character in a play, you know? It's the voice of one of the characters in a story he's writing. So, if the guitar is the voice, and let's say that voice is very dry, with no reverb, that implies someone is talking closely or maybe in your ear at a bar. But what if they're yelling? Is there a band playing in that bar? If so, what are they playing? So, I had to think dramatically about those songs and on *Rain Dogs*. I'd think, 'Okay, what country are we in? And what decade is it? What side of town are these people on?' Those things influenced what pickups I used, how much reverb, for example, I used, and what sort of reverb I used.

What was your setup like while working with on *Rain Dogs* and *Franks Wild Years*?
Poverty accounted for many of my choices back then! And God, this

"I WOULD JUST PLUG INTO A LOT OF CHEAP PEDALS AND HOPE FOR THE BEST. THAT HASN'T CHANGED MUCH..."



EASY RIDER
"Truthfully, I don't have a process," Marc says. "And I'm lazy!"

is terrible, but I had this old Tele, and I can't remember the name of it. It was a knockoff, fake thing – I believe it was by ESP. But that's the guitar I used on *Rain Dogs* and *Franks Wild Years*. It was made in Japan, and it was awful but also beautiful. It was a knockoff and not a Fender, but looking back, maybe it was a strong fake Tele.

Keith Richards also played on *Rain Dogs*. Did you collaborate with him during those sessions?
No, not at all. We might have been in the studio together once, but not working together. I literally walked in one day as Keith was leaving. I met him later in life, and I've always been a huge fan of his playing, but no, there was no collaboration. Keith maybe did some basic tracks that I'm on for *Rain Dogs*, but I would have come in after to do overdubs. But there were plenty of instances where we weren't even on the same tracks.

How about your signal chain, specifically on Waits' 1987 song *Hang On St. Christopher*?
Back then, I'd just plug into a lot of cheap pedals and hope for the best. That hasn't changed much, but with my EHX and Analog Man stuff, I've upgraded some. But I still have some things from the old days – primarily those focused on true bypass. Most of the nameplates have come off over the years, but they've served me well. I like dealing with things that could plausibly come through a distorted Deluxe Reverb.

Pushing forward to your work on Robert Plant & Alison Krauss's *Raising Sand*, how had your rig progressed?
Not by much! I had my '60s Fender Jag by then; I believe it's a '62. And I had gotten into the EHX stuff by then. By that time, I also had my Lehle [Mono] Volume Pedal, the one all the pedal steel players use. But the approach stayed the same because I always try to think about what sonically blends and sticks out.

And with Robert and Alison, what stuck out most?
With *Raising Sand*, it was more about what historically blends and sticks out. I had to think, 'Is this a record like the past? Are they going for a classic Nashville sound from the '50s?' I wanted to ensure I referenced whatever they wanted and whoever they were trying to be. I wanted to be in the right decade, country, race, and gender, you know?

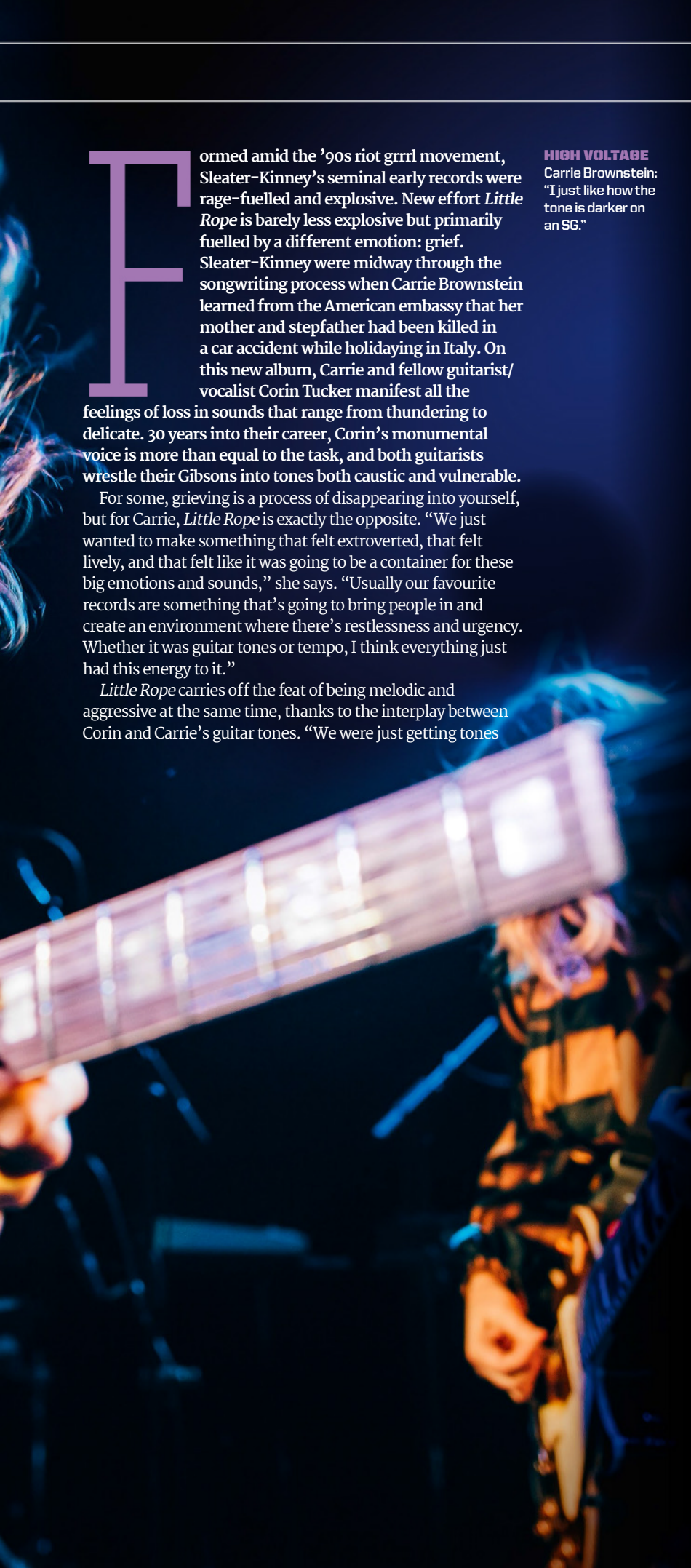
How does shifting from a knockoff Tele to a Fender Jag to an SG alter what you do?
There's a lot that goes into inspiration. There's more nuance in the Jag than the Tele, where there are slight changes in what I do with my left or right hand. That can make a big tonal difference. As for the SG, I don't know; I guess the Jag seems to inspire less predictable and weirder tones than the SG.

And what's the secret to balancing being a successful session player with your solo career?
You'd have to ask someone else about being a successful session player! Tell all the musicians out there that I'm available – that I'm the president of Overdubs 'R' Us! Call my manager – I'm home all week! But I don't know… Session work and my stuff are entirely different animals. The studio puts time under a microscope, and you feel it on a granular level. But with my stuff – especially when I play live, it just grooves, and there are no limitations. I like it that way.

Words Jenna Scaramanga
Portrait Kimberley Ross

"WE LIKE HEAVY SOUNDS ON GUITAR!"

Alt-rock trailblazers **Sleater-Kinney** were making bass-less records long before The White Stripes and The Black Keys came along. As co-leader Carrie Brownstein says: "The power comes from the conversation that the two guitars are having with each other..."



HIGH VOLTAGE
Carrie Brownstein: "I just like how the tone is darker on an SG."

Formed amid the '90s riot grrrl movement, Sleater-Kinney's seminal early records were rage-fuelled and explosive. New effort *Little Rope* is barely less explosive but primarily fuelled by a different emotion: grief. Sleater-Kinney were midway through the songwriting process when Carrie Brownstein learned from the American embassy that her mother and stepfather had been killed in a car accident while holidaying in Italy. On this new album, Carrie and fellow guitarist/vocalist Corin Tucker manifest all the feelings of loss in sounds that range from thundering to delicate. 30 years into their career, Corin's monumental voice is more than equal to the task, and both guitarists wrestle their Gibsons into tones both caustic and vulnerable.

For some, grieving is a process of disappearing into yourself, but for Carrie, *Little Rope* is exactly the opposite. "We just wanted to make something that felt extroverted, that felt lively, and that felt like it was going to be a container for these big emotions and sounds," she says. "Usually our favourite records are something that's going to bring people in and create an environment where there's restlessness and urgency. Whether it was guitar tones or tempo, I think everything just had this energy to it."

Little Rope carries off the feat of being melodic and aggressive at the same time, thanks to the interplay between Corin and Carrie's guitar tones. "We were just getting tones that were really crunchy to layer underneath prettier tones," Carrie explains. "Two pedals that we really toyed with a lot were the Expandora [fuzz] and the Jangle Box [compressor]. I used a lot of chorus. I like putting a little harmoniser on things, or phase, but I like stacking that over something that is very corrosive.

"It's like at the core of the song is just this vibrational distortion that's kind of breaking apart," she continues. "I feel like that kind of creates like an ambient world for the song. It still has clarity that you can still hear the notes. It's not just blown out, but it's atmospheric, I guess, and immersive. And then on top of that, you can really stack melody and have that contrast. So much of this album is about that contrast between something that's very harmonious and pretty, and then something that's kind of dark and edgy. I think we were trying to build that tonally as well."

Despite the diversity of tones on show, Sleater-Kinney have not yet been tempted to the dark side of digital modelling. "I've messed around with modellers but I really like hearing a speaker," Carrie shrugs.

Corin and Carrie both rely on Fender amps as clean pedal platforms to build their tones. Corin recorded *Little Rope* with a Fender Showman head that was stolen just after she finished tracking, while Carrie prefers her 65 Deluxe Reverb reissue combo. "I think we also used a Super Reverb and a couple other things in the studio," Carrie says. "But I love the Deluxe Reverb. I actually don't use a ton of reverb on it, but I just think it's a great amp. It handles effects really well and it lets the guitar do most of the talking. Fender's really good at that. There's just a nice purity to it but it's warm. And it doesn't squeeze anything. I like having enough headroom where you can really express the highs and lows and not get too bogged down by too much midrange. It's a good dynamic amp."

Guitar-wise, however, the Fender loyalty ends. Corin's current favourite squeeze is a P-90 Les Paul gold top that was a 50th birthday present from Brownstein. Carrie's favourite Gibson, meanwhile, is an opinion divider: "I mostly went back and played my 1972 SG on this album. Yes, it is from the controversial Norlin era. Some people say that's the years when Gibson got pretty inconsistent. I think that's true, but there are definitely Gibsons from that era that still sound great. I have an SG Special as well. I played a couple of different ones on this album. I just ike how the tone is darker on an SG."

The pair sometimes get extra mileage from layering humbuckers with the P-90 tones of Carrie's Special or Corin's goldtop. "They have different kinds of sustain. The tones just fit together nicely," Carrie summarises neatly. "I think when we're both still in the Gibson world, we just like the density of it. It's dark and thick, and to me it's just heavy. We like heavy sounds on guitar, and I like to be able to get that just from the guitar. Yes, I love pedals, but I do like the warm, heavy tone of a Gibson, no matter the pickup. I guess every once in a while they have something that's a little brighter, but for the most part Gibson is the dark arts of guitar."

While The White Stripes and The Black Keys are often credited with popularising the rock band without a bassist, Sleater-Kinney were making bassless records before those bands were known to even the most dedicated hipsters. Carrie is modest about their role in developing that idea, though. "We came from a scene that really deconstructed the notion of what a conventional band looked like. In Olympia, Washington in the 1990s there were so many avant-garde configurations

NEW ORDER
Carrie, left, and Corin. "We came from a scene that really deconstructed the notion of what a conventional band looked like."

of bands. There were bands that were just bass and drums. There were one guitar and a drummer, or just two guitarists. It was so common in this Pacific Northwest scene to not have a bass or to only have a bass that it didn't feel conspicuous or even notable."

To compensate for that lack of low-end, Sleater-Kinney tune to C# standard, and they also construct their guitar lines to work on their own. "It's the combination of amp, guitar tone, and the detuning, I think naturally sort of conjured the low end. If not in a literal sense, it kind of evoked low end," Carrie explains with the satisfaction that comes from having created something distinctive.

"It's something we honed more and became more deliberate about, once we realised we weren't just going to be putting out two records. But it just worked. We weren't overly concerned about the ways that it didn't conform to what a 'normal' band sounded like. The power didn't come from low end. The power came from the way our guitars sounded together, from the sheer velocity of the songs. The power came from Corin's vocals, and from the conversation that the two guitars were having with each other."

Many traditional rock albums are built from the ground up, with drums and bass going down first, so the guitar tone has to fit around that foundation. For Sleater-Kinney, it's the reverse. "I wouldn't say bass is an afterthought, but the bass tone has to conform to the guitar," Carrie observes. "The building blocks of our band is two guitars with Corin sometimes playing something more akin to a bassline, but often not. We don't adhere to a specific rule in that way. If we're adding bass to a song in the studio, often we're dealing with sub bass that's just really there as the low end rumble so it's not stepping on Corin's guitar line."

Carrie builds her parts to sit on top of Corin's foundation. "I'm the 'lead guitarist' in Sleater-Kinney, but I'm not a shredder," she comments. "You can trick yourself as a guitar player into thinking that virtuosity means playing really, really quickly. I think it's more about what you're saying than how much you're saying. Some of the best guitar lines are one-note leads or three-note leads. If they are perfectly placed, it doesn't matter. I think it's really important to just get away from this idea that you have to be garrulous with your playing." Instead, Carrie looks for unusual partial chord shapes to create interesting harmony. "I just love inverting things. I just add a weird suspended note, or something kind of minor or discordant. I often will start somewhere traditional, and then just reverse or invert it. Then it just has an edge to it. It just gives it a character. I think I'm always looking for character in notes or riffs, especially something that moves it into a place that's a little more ineffable, a little more exciting."

For Sleater-Kinney, pressing against the limitations of their guitar-only format has forced them to find an individual sound. "I think having that kind of restriction placed upon you forces you to think about tone in a different way, to think about low end, to write differently," Carrie says. "If you're emulating something, you think, 'We need all these ingredients, and that will add up to something that has force.' But we found our force somewhere else. We weren't looking for a certain frequency. We were creating the frequency out of what was available to us. A lot of bands that have a unique sound create their own core."

"Finding the in-between with guitar, I think, is part of the charm," she muses. "There's so many options for shaping notes, for shaping chords. I love not quite knowing what someone's playing on guitar. Like, if I'm listening to someone else's song, thinking, 'That seems like this note, but they're doing something different with it.' That, to me, is why guitar so wonderful, so expressive. It emulates the human voice and human emotions so well. And I think of it like the ways that every time we speak, or every time we cry, every time we laugh as humans has a different characteristic to it. I like thinking of the guitar like that, too. That's why it's my favourite instrument and I think just approaching it with that humanity and that openness can make for some really creative, innovative play."

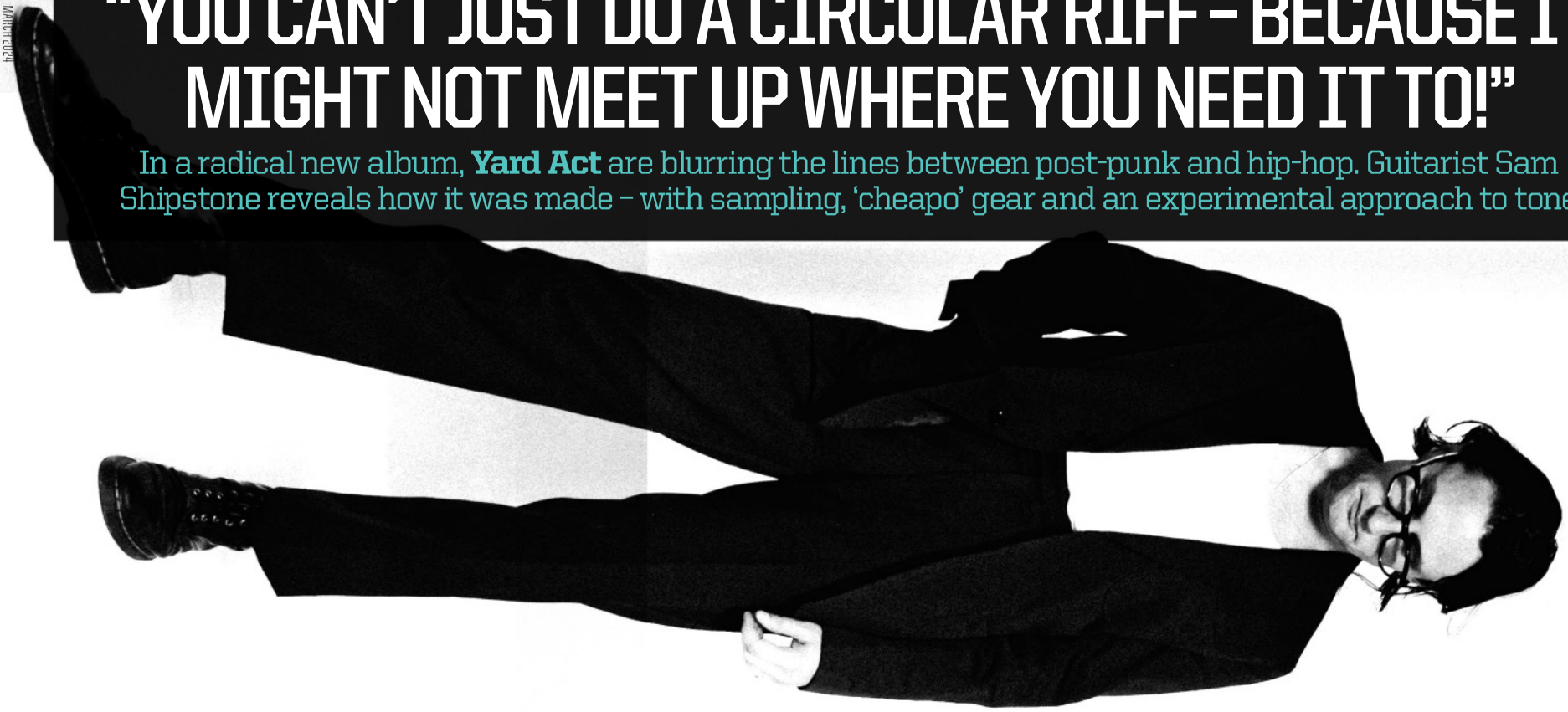
Little Rope is out now.

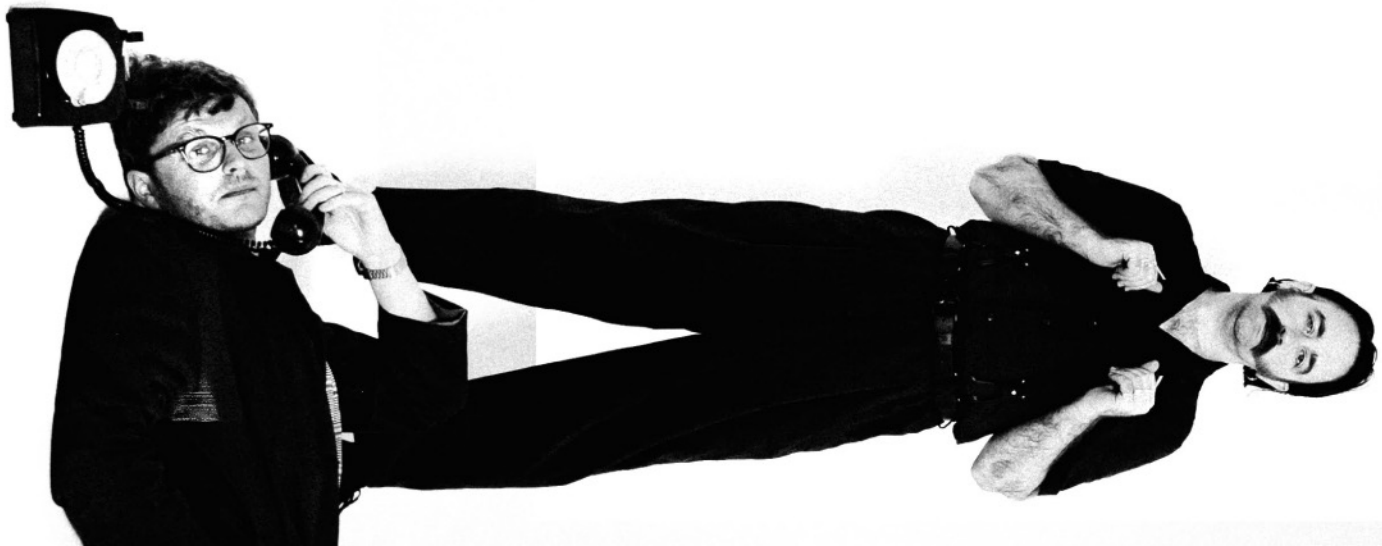
"GUITAR IS SO WONDERFUL, SO EXPRESSIVE. IT EMULATES THE HUMAN VOICE AND HUMAN EMOTIONS SO WELL"

Words Jonathan Horsley

"YOU CAN'T JUST DO A CIRCULAR RIFF – BECAUSE IT MIGHT NOT MEET UP WHERE YOU NEED IT TO!"

In a radical new album, **Yard Act** are blurring the lines between post-punk and hip-hop. Guitarist Sam Shipstone reveals how it was made – with sampling, 'cheapo' gear and an experimental approach to tone





None of what you'll hear on Yard Act's thrilling and stylistically audacious sophomore album is what you could call conventional, but on occasion it borrows from convention, perhaps just to leave armchair musicologists with a little mud to grapple around in in search of a label to pin on them. Those we had are out of date.

Here we had the Leeds-based quartet down as a post-punk concern on the back of the urgent, wiry skronk of 2022 debut *The Overload*, and now along comes *Where's My Utopia*? – all enigmatic and dynamic, the sound of a band whose sensibility has aggressively expanded, whose musical appetites have grown more adventurous from time spent together on the stage and in rehearsal rooms.

It's not to say that it is wholly divorced from post-punk, but there is a more pertinent question to ask: is this a hip-hop record? Its production, overseen by Gorillaz' drummer/producer Remi Kabaka Jr, bears some of the hallmarks of '90s hip-hop, from the radio static breathing life into the album, and the vocal samples, down to the arrangements themselves. One key track, *Down By The Stream*, is animated by a jacking beat that sounds as though it was engineered by Ced-Gee on an E-mu SP-1200 sampler, and is given muscle from Ryan Needham's bassline. And what all this musical radicalism does is grant Sam Shipstone permission to subvert melody entirely and set loose a little anarchy on his guitar.

"When it started out with *Down By The Stream* it was completely different, and then we put on this really meaty bassline that James did, and then the drums changed, so this guitar part sounded even more atonal than when it started out," he says, likening the track's evolution to the philosophical thought experiment about the Ship of Theseus and the question of what's left of an object's identity when all its original parts have been replaced – an analogy that in and of itself that tells you we are dealing with something out of the ordinary. "That was a slow development," Sam says. "I didn't intentionally write that guitar part like that. It just jarred against what that song became in a really good way."

Many of the original parts on the album got cut up, sampled and reused. One of the beauties of modern recording is that you can move things around without the audience never knowing any different. "*Down By The Stream*, that's literally chopped and sampled in parts, the way it jumps and moves," he explains. "There are other tracks where we chopped it up like hip-hop in the same way. There's a lot of sampling on this record. We would just sample things over and over and see if it fitted, and sometimes they fitted in a really poetic way. But then you can't do a samples record anymore because it's a nightmare – it's so expensive. So we had to recreate everything, which was an absolute pain in the arse!"

There are other trace elements of hip-hop in the album's opening track *An Illusion*, with its modulation between dark R 'n' B menace and blissed-out hazy lounge jazz, and in the low-key triumphant *We Make Hits*, the track wheezes into life as though it had been ported onto vinyl and warped up to pitch as the turntable accelerates to 33 1/3 rpm. Like hip-hop, the sound is similarly led by verse, vocalist James Smith's freewheeling poetry steering the

direction of the song. Indeed, Smith's writing steers the direction of the writing process, leaving Shipstone in the position of composing to the vocals, and that has changed how he phrases his guitar parts, allowing for an unorthodox conversational style that adds not only to the forward momentum of the material, as though all the instrumentation was in pursuit of an idea, but also a sense of freedom. Anything could happen.

"It's a Yard Act thing," Sam says, "and I think it comes from the fact that – unusually for a band – the vocals come really, really early in the demoing and often James writes so fast and so quickly. I think that allows for more of a conversation because you are not having to undo any of the work you are doing."

But whether it could be classified as hip-hop seems besides the point. There are way too many other musical references to ever sustain the musicologist's hip-hop line of enquiry. Yard Act reference sounds as though it were as easy as channel-surfing. Shipstone's guitar gives Yard Act the untamed electricity of rock 'n' roll, often dialling in a ghostly spaghetti western tone that could have come off the soundtrack to Alex Cox's *Straight To Hell* [1987]. His playing also connects Yard Act to funk and soul, as when parking chord stabs on the backbeat on *The Undertow*, but there are also occasions when conventional licks would be an irrelevance, when using guitar as a texture maximises its impact. Shipstone's conversational style can make it sound as though he is playing on free time while his bandmates are punching the clock on the grid, and this sleight of hand sells us the illusion that these songs are being composed in the moment.

Again, the audience doesn't need to be aware of just how difficult it was to put this together. Keep them on the other side of the curtain. They're happy there. But the practising musicians need to know; they need to be aware that there can be all manner of restrictions when you write guitar to a vocal line, like when inspiration strikes and you compose a beast of a riff on 4/4 time only to find it doesn't fit. Riffs live and die by the rhythm, and how much space they've got, and that is just how it is. That is just one of the physical laws of music, and it is one of the lessons we can take from Yard Act and how Shipstone positions his guitar in the songwriting. "You can't just do a circular riff because it might not meet up where you need it to," he says.

LOVELY BONES
Yard Act, from left: Ryan Needham, Sam Shipstone, James Smith, Jay Russell

As for tone, in a band like Yard Act it has to be moveable fast, reacting to the song as it develops. "I remember focusing on the final guitar riff on *A Vineyard For The North* and going through quite a few iterations," Sam says. "Because when we first started that song it was a lot more open and jazzy – quite Radiohead: *In Rainbows*; the finale of that song. Then we put on quite a strong dance beat on and the guitar part didn't work as well against it so we had to work for ages on that. We went through quite a lot of different effects, but it's not got a lot of effects. We just did it on a 12-string, in fact. That was the solution to that in the end.

"That was quite hard work on the fingers, and doing that over and over on the 12-string I was like, 'I really wish this wasn't the solution!' But it had this chime that just worked for that riff. We wanted it to come forward but we couldn't find a way to do it until that guitar came into our hands."

The production suggests that *Where's My Utopia?* was an expensive record to put together, but that's another trick on the ear. Some of what you are hearing was originally demo material recorded at home, with drummer Jay Russell operating the digital tools. Further sessions at Russell's father's studio in Kettering and at The Nave in Leeds would finish the record off.

"I'm glad you said it sounded expensive, because it wasn't, really!" Sam laughs. "We hired a string section and a choir, but otherwise it wasn't the most expensive record."

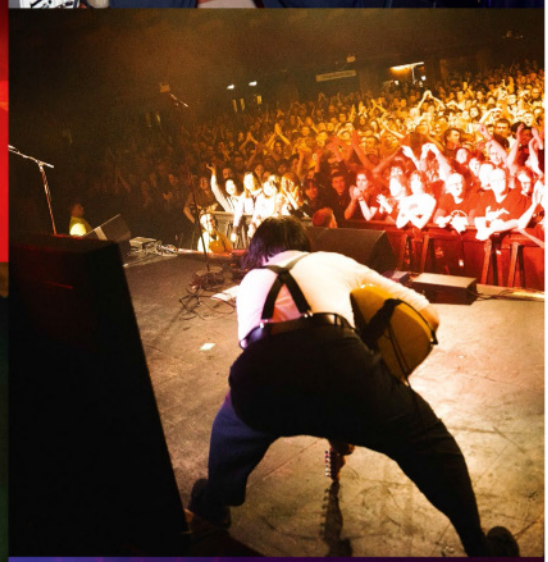
And there was some super-budget gear on the recording, with Shipstone using Needham's Squier Bullet Telecaster on *Fizzy Fish*. "When I put that on with headphones, that's where that *Fizzy Fish* riff came from," he says. "It sounded dead good DI'd. It's a bit bizarre, that. It was surprisingly good for a cheapo guitar."

Elsewhere, Sam stuck to his G&L ASAT on most of the tracks. The Leo Fender-designed second-generation T-style would rival a clawhammer for durability. It is a bright guitar so it typically gets paired with a Fender Blues DeVille tube combo when playing live.

"There's something about the bassiness with that amp that complements the weediness of the tone," he says. "And the tone is a bit hot, so it can end up sounding a bit farty and blurring out in a pleasing way, so the Blues DeVille copes with that in a nice way. I never like using an amp with a lot of gain on it because my tone is already destroyed by the time it gets to the amp. I need it to be transparent."

When Sam last spoke to TG, he explained how Yard Act required less from his pedalboard than previous commitments with Hookworms. He had the Fulltone MOSFET FullDrive 2, an MXR EQ pedal, a Strymon Flint and a POG2 for The Overload. This time out it is as though he has a 'board for daytime sounds and one for the nocturnal, like on *Blackpool Illuminations*, which sounds like it is haunted by old rock 'n' roll, and could be read as a formalist commentary on the track's subject matter, as though Shipstone is bringing

"MY TONE IS ALREADY DESTROYED BY THE TIME IT GETS TO THE AMP"



a faded British seaside town to life through dark, subdued guitar tone. He says it's unconscious, but there are a number of occasions when the guitar tone sounds as if it is referencing the track thematically – like on *Dream Job*, which has this sort of '80s studio guitar tone that somehow sounds cheap and high-class at the same time, and just right to complement Smith's lyrics and flourish in two-and-a-half-minutes of sound that reverberates with the *joie de vivre* of Talking Heads.

Recreating all of this live is going to be a challenge. It might require an expansion of the pedalboard. It might require more guitars. It might require Shipstone to make peace with the idea that, in a band like this, to perform this live, he might have to give in and let the pedal do the heavy lifting, to be the delay pedal operator if only just for one song.

"Quite a lot of those parts are going to have to remain texture – because I suppose in *The Overload* there weren't really guitar parts like that," he says. Still, he takes a bit of pleasure in creating a sound manually rather than using the pedalboard.

"I never use a delay live, but just to make things sound a little better studio-wise we often use a bit of [EHX] Memory Boy on a lot of things," he says. "With one thing that I loved, the solo in *Grifter's Grief*, when we took it to The Nave. Alex Greaves, one of the engineers there, asked, 'Did you use one of those pitch-benders there?' And I said, 'No! We didn't! I did it with my hands!' I was so chuffed with that."

Where's My Utopia? did, however, involve a lot of plugins. The SketchCassette tape emulation plugin from Aberrant DSP was used so much that it became a running joke. "Every time that opened everyone in the room laughed," Sam says. But its capacity to degrade the sound on samples and guitar contributes to the depth of field in the mix. So too does the mix of DI'd and re-amped guitar, with some of the leads recorded and left direct.

Who knows if it's post-punk, hip-hop or alt-rock, but this is nose-to-tail a 21st-century album – literate, knowing, unorthodox, fourth-wall breaking, and facilitated by music's digital revolution. "I was reflecting on how technology has allowed us to produce this record in this way," Sam says. "At no other era in time would we have been able to produce a record like this."

***Where's My Utopia?* is out on March 1.**

Words Chris Bird **Photography** Bojan Hohnjec © Miracle Productions LLP / Getty

"IN THE HEAT OF THE BATTLE, WHEN WE'RE PLAYING *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY* LIVE AND *THAT* RIFF COMES ALONG, I'M EXCITED, BUT I'VE GOT TO KEEP A PART OF MY BRAIN COOL JUST TO HANDLE WHERE THE FINGERS HAVE TO GO. IT'S ONE OF THE MOST UNNATURAL RIFFS TO PLAY THAT YOU COULD POSSIBLY IMAGINE!"

In a world exclusive interview, Queen's guitar genius **Brian May** recalls how many of the band's most famous songs were created, what inspired his magical solos in *Killer Queen*, *Don't Stop Me Now*, *Crazy Little Thing Called Love* and more, and why the band cooked up a punk-stye version of *We Will Rock You*. He also reveals why he didn't play the funk rhythm on *Another One Bites The Dust*, and why that heavy riff on *Bohemian Rhapsody* is still one of the hardest things to play...

BRIAN MAY IS FEELING GOOD.

"A little tired," he smiles, "but very happy." On a cold winter afternoon, the legendary guitarist is talking to *Total Guitar* from his home in Surrey, a few days after the North American leg of Queen + Adam Lambert's Rhapsody tour ended with another sold-out date at the BMO Stadium in Los Angeles.

"Everyone in the States has been saying that this show is the best we've ever done with Adam," he says. "So it's a great result. Wonderful!"

Certainly, the Rhapsody tour – which reaches Japan this month – is a huge production with spectacular state-of-the-art visual effects. "I've always loved to make a show a real event," Brian says.

But it's the music, of course, that continues to draw huge audiences for this tour across the globe – all of those great songs that Queen recorded with Freddie Mercury from the early '70s until the singer's death on November 24, 1991.

In a lengthy conversation with TG, Brian discusses the creation – and his role specifically – in many of the biggest hit songs and landmark tracks in Queen's career. Ten of these songs featured in the setlist from that recent show in LA: *Killer Queen*, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Love Of My Life*, *We Are The Champions*, *Don't Stop Me Now*, *We Will Rock You*, *Another One Bites The Dust*, *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*, *Under Pressure* and *A Kind Of Magic*.

One is a hit that Brian wrote with his tongue-in-cheek – the OTT movie theme *Flash*. Another has great poignancy as one of the last Queen songs released in Freddie Mercury's lifetime – *These Are The Days Of Our Lives*.

And finally, there is a fan-favourite deep cut from 1980, *Dragon Attack*, picked out for TG by one of Brian's greatest admirers, Metallica lead guitarist Kirk Hammett.

As Kirk tells us: "I love Queen. I love all of it. I love all the stuff that everyone else loves. I especially love that song *Dragon Attack*."

But before we get to that, we're going all the way back to the 1970s, beginning with the hit single that defined Queen as one of the most inventive and original rock groups of that era…

GOOD COMPANY
Brian with drummer Roger Taylor and singer Adam Lambert, who has performed with Queen since 2011

KILLER QUEEN

On the 1974 single that gave Queen their first taste of international success, Brian's solo is exquisite – starting with some bluesy minor bends lower down the neck before the motif repeats higher up and swells into harmonised layers, adding depth in similar ways to the vocals in The Beatles' early hit *Please Please Me*. Similar usages of harmonisation can be found in 1961 track Pasadena by '60s trad-jazz revivalists The Temperance Seven, and the cascading strings typified by Anglo-Italian conductor Annunzio Paolo Mantovani. As Brian has noted, it's as if "the three voices of guitars are all doing little tunes of their own".

Can you talk me through the process of writing and recording the guitar solo in *Killer Queen*?

Well, I love the track. I think it's one of Freddie's most perfect creations. The story behind it is that I was in hospital. We'd come back from a tour in America and I got very sick with hepatitis, so when the other guys went into the studio to start making the *Sheer Heart Attack* album I was in hospital, with lots of complications. While I was there they brought a tape of *Killer Queen* in for me. They'd already laid down the piano, bass and drums, and they'd started putting some backing vocals on.

I had loads of time to sit and think – to figure out where I wanted the solo to be and develop the idea in my mind. And what we ended up with is a solo that has lots of different parts. So it's not just playing a verse, it's being part of the arrangement and leading into a verse. I could kind of hear it in my head, and that's always a good sign for me. I don't like to go into the studio with no ideas. I like to have a clear idea of where I'm going. The main solo has three parts, three guitars. I could hear that solo in my head and I wanted to do this kind of bells thing…

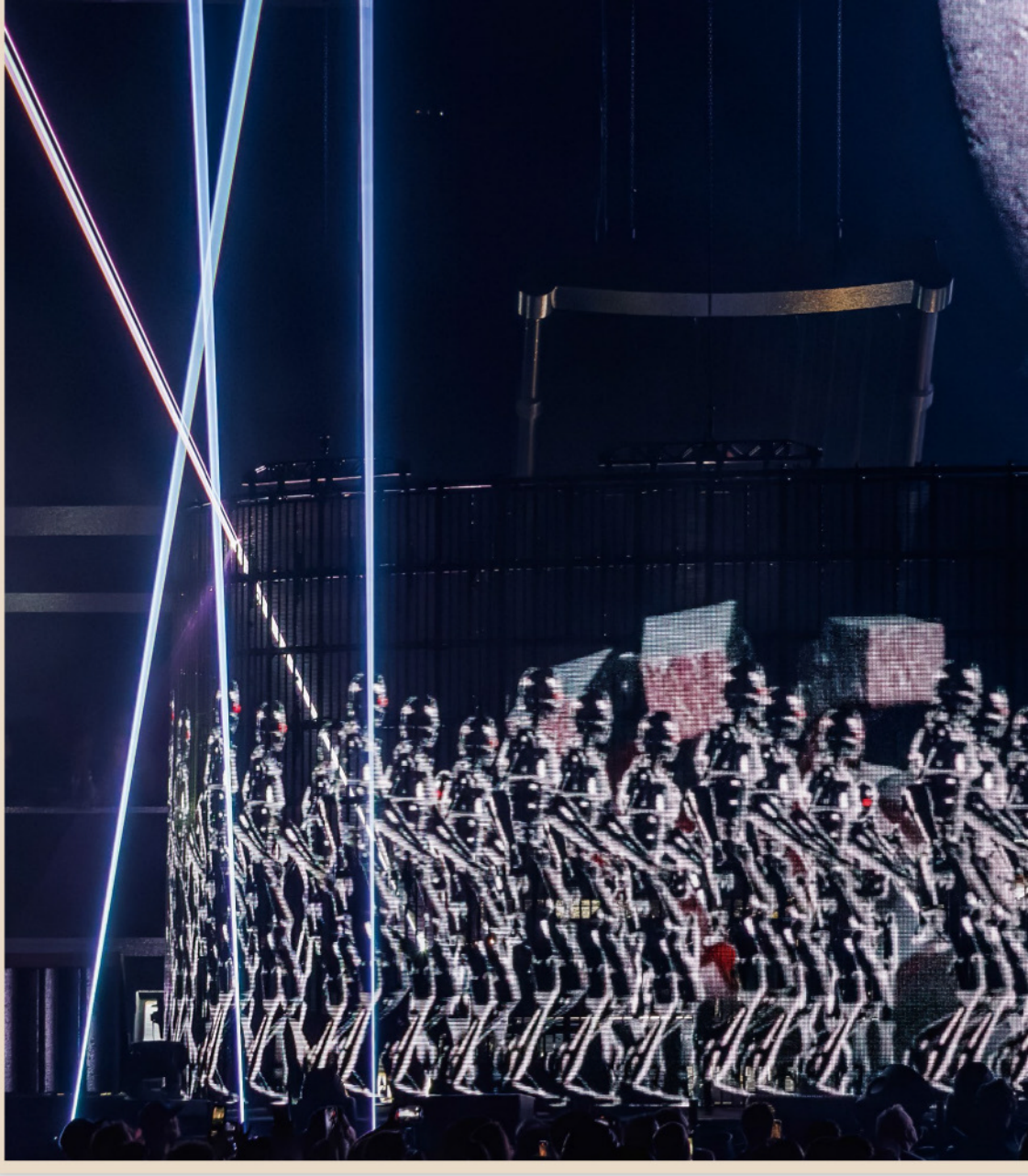
Bells?

I call it bells. I don't know what other people would call it, but it's when you play a note on one instrument and then it carries on but the next note comes in from another instrument and makes a harmony with it while it's still going. And then another one. It's like a peal of bells where the sounds add up in sequence. And really I got it from listening to things like the Mantovani piece *Charmaine* in my childhood, where he does exactly that – a dissonant harmony.

I know for a fact that The Beatles were influenced by that as well, because they did something similar in *Please Please Me*. It's not quite the same thing, but it's like adding instruments in to make the dissonance and the harmony.

I should be talking about the Temperance Seven and a song called *Pasadena*. The three lead instruments, which I think is a trumpet, clarinet and trombone, they do this bells thing. And I was always inspired by it. I always wanted to do it, and that was the opportunity.

"KILLER QUEEN IS ONE OF FREDDIE'S MOST PERFECT CREATIONS"



In the third section of that solo, that chiming bells effect is enhanced with stereo panning. So if you're listening, particularly in headphones, you get that feeling of things happening in stereo.
Yeah, we were always into stereo. We were influenced by The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix, where they actually painted pictures in stereo. And of course, we were able to start where The Beatles left off in a way, because we had much more up to date gear, and we had a lot more tracks to play with. So we went with those influences, but we were able to take things a lot further.

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

Freddie Mercury's masterpiece is a six-minute suite of world-conquering brilliance. And in its climactic hard rock section, the riff, written by Mercury on piano, feels quite unnatural when transposed onto guitar. It starts on the sixth fret of the A-string and climbs back up from the third fret of the low E in a way that implies G Phrygian, the third mode of E♭ major. Towards the end of the idea, the original opening note moves up a tone and the same shape repeats, the A note on the sixth string suggesting a key change into A Phrygian, the third mode of F major.

In previous interviews with *Total Guitar* you've spoken about the guitar solo in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, but let's talk now about that song's end section, in which the band really rocks out. It was Freddie's song, so did he have all of it planned out, or was that rock section worked out with you?
It was more Freddie's idea. Freddie had that riff in his head and he played it on the piano, which is quite difficult because he plays in octaves. I just worked off that and slightly adapted it to the way a guitar needs to play it. And I was able to do a lot of interesting stuff with sounds because in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, I pretty much use every sound that my guitar can create with different pickup combinations. So even during the course of those riffs, the sound is changing because there are different guitars coming in with different pickups selections. But it's funny – Freddie was a good riffmeister, really! That riff for *Ogre Battle* [from 1974's *Queen II*], a lot of people think that's mine, but that came out of Freddie's head. So he had very good 'heavy' sensibilities. He was a devotee of Jimi Hendrix. People think he was just concerned with the lighter stuff but it's not true. He did enjoy the heavy stuff, too.

The *Bohemian Rhapsody* riff in particular doesn't sound very guitaristic in an obvious sense...
No. It's not a riff that a guitarist would naturally play. And that's a double-edged sword. It's difficult for the guitar to get a hold of it, but once you have got hold of it, it's very unusual. And to be honest, I still don't find it easy! I can play it at home okay, but in the heat of the battle, if you like, when we're playing it live, and there's huge adrenaline, it's the climax of the show and that riff comes along, it's not the easiest thing to play. I'm excited and I've got to keep the passion, but I've

"IN BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY, I PRETTY MUCH USE EVERY SOUND THAT MY GUITAR CAN CREATE"

EYES DOWN FOR A FULL HOUSE
Brian in action on The Rhapsody Tour

got to keep a part of my brain cool just to handle where the fingers have to go because it isn't natural. It's one of the most unnatural riffs to play you could possibly imagine. But that's that is the joy of it, really, because it's so unusual.

Yeah, I have learned it myself in the past...
It involves a lot of stretching of the fingers, doesn't it?

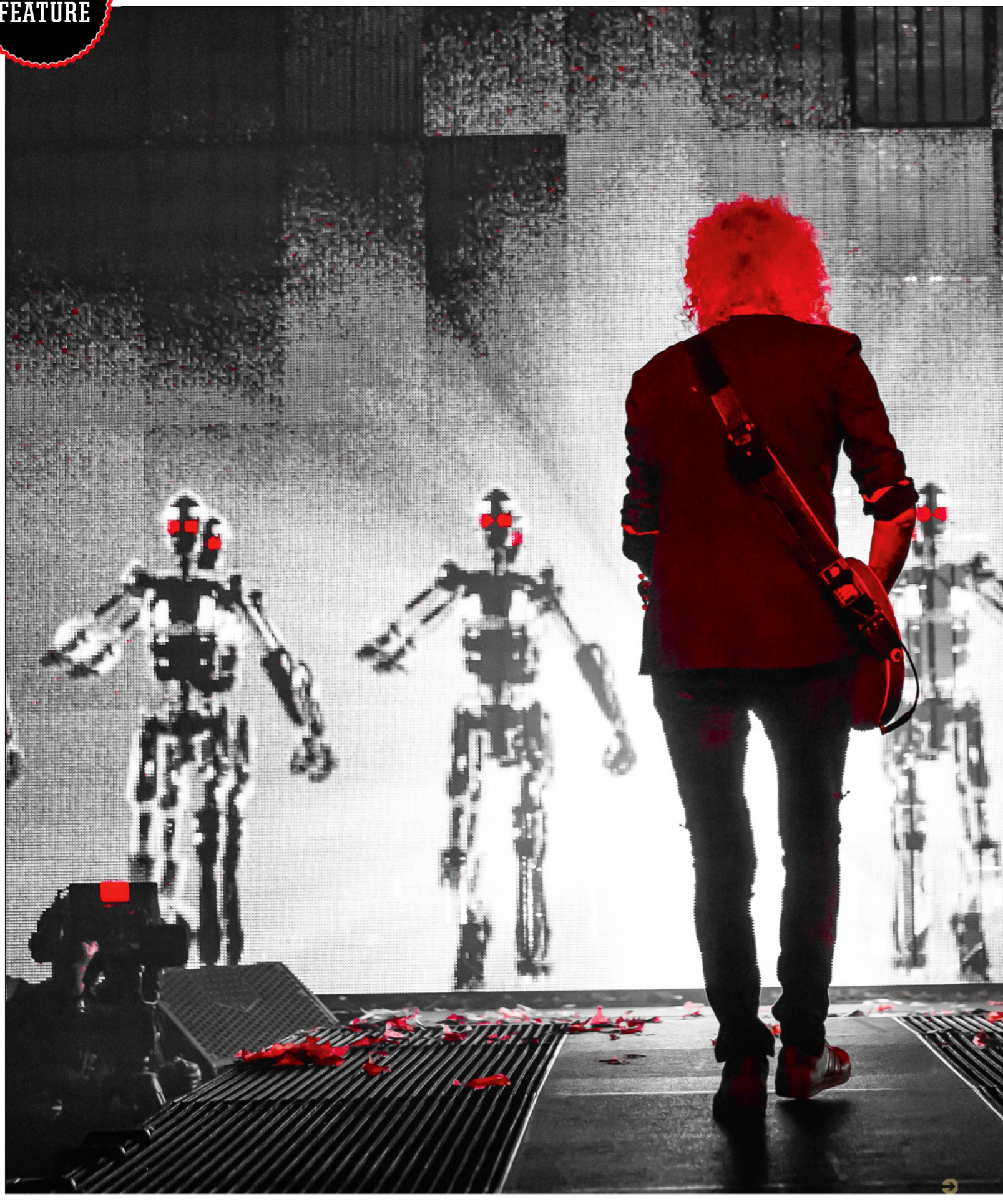
It does, and it's definitely very complex. I probably should have guessed that it was a Freddie thing because it's just so un-guitar-y in that respect.
Yeah, well, Freddie had a habit of writing an E♭ and A♭, and so it was always a challenge for me to find places on the guitar to make that work. But it obviously contributed a lot to the way I developed as a player. It was a good thing, even if it was… strange!

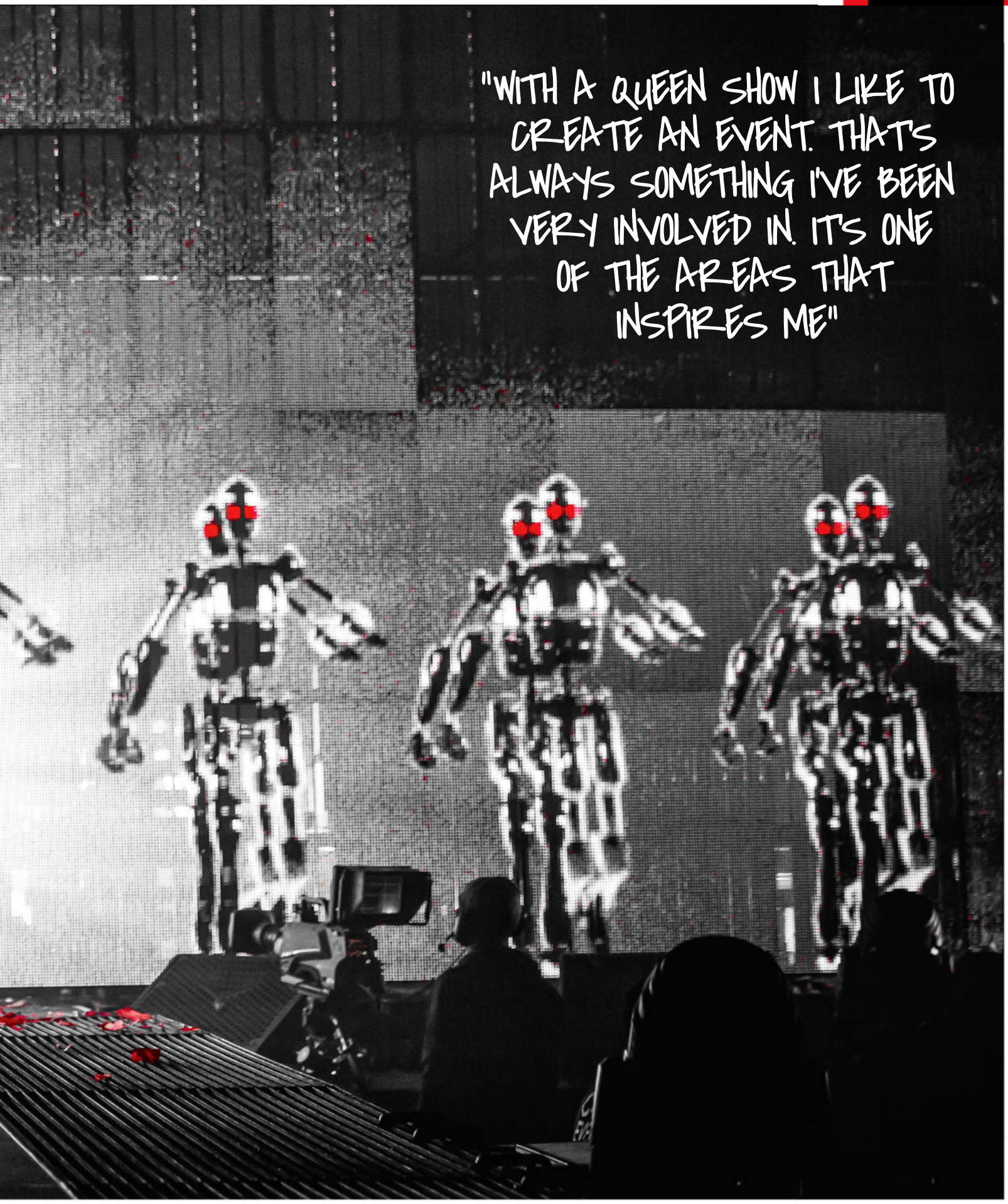
LOVE OF MY LIFE

The original recording of Mercury's beautiful ballad on the 1975 album *A Night At The Opera* features May on harp and, of course, his Red Special, which was used for the sustaining string-like notes that are introduced halfway in, as well as the harmonised leads in F major that arrive shortly after. Later, a different version was rearranged for 12-string acoustic and transposed minor 3rd down. This version featured on 1979's *Live Killers*, and due to the song's popularity with South American audiences it was released as a single and became a huge hit in Argentina and Brazil.

How did you go about turning this song from a piano arrangement to the acoustic guitar arrangement that you perform live?
That happened very quickly with just me and Freddie. It was obvious that we couldn't do the arrangement on the record because it's so complex. It's not just the piano, it's got harp and all sorts of lovely backing. And it's got a whole orchestra of guitar. So we couldn't do it live that way. I don't know whose idea it was, but Freddie and I thought we would just try and do it as the two of us with an acoustic guitar. So I just started playing it. I think it's even in a different key. I played it the way it was easy to play on an acoustic and it was just thrown together in a few minutes, to be honest. The song became so enormously successful in South America that we eventually put it out as a single in that style. But you can tell it's enormously simplified from the way it is on the record.

The guitar part is quite sophisticated. It doesn't feel like a simple strummed three- or five-chord vamp, as it were.




"WITH A QUEEN SHOW I LIKE TO CREATE AN EVENT. THAT'S ALWAYS SOMETHING I'VE BEEN VERY INVOLVED IN. IT'S ONE OF THE AREAS THAT INSPIRES ME"

No, you're right. It's not strummed, it's picked. And I suppose I was trying, in my mind, to do what the piano did on the record – in my own way. And it grew. It gradually grew into something which stood up on its own. And that guitar solo in the middle, I don't even know where that came from, to be honest. It just kind of grew out of the atmosphere of doing that thing live.

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

Two of Queen's greatest songs are inextricably linked – May's *We Will Rock You* and Mercury's *We Are The Champions*, released as a double A-side single in 1977, and often paired for live performances. Brian's guitar work in *We Are The Champions* has more of an overdub feel – especially as there's no dedicated solo section. Instead, May duels against Mercury's vocals basing himself around the first position of D minor pentatonic at the 10th fret in order to imply F major. It's one of the oldest tricks in the book for playing in major keys – shifting down three frets and playing the relative minor shape instead.

There's plenty of guitar playing in this song. But was a breakout solo ever considered or discussed? A melodic break-type solo? Do you think it could have worked?

No, it was never discussed. But what was discussed was that Freddie wanted the guitar to be fighting with the voice towards the end. It's a strange story. I'd done the rhythm part for that, and sort of forgotten about it. And then I think we were in Wessex studios. And it came quite quickly to the time when we were going to mix it, and I suddenly thought, I haven't really thought about this, there's not really any lead guitar on there. And I came back into the studio on the morning of the mix, and basically redid most of it, because I could hear it much more clearly in my head. And I put in those answering pieces, the lead guitar responses to Freddie's vocal, particularly at the end. Also, again, those little bell chimes-type things in the second verse, because I'd sketched it but it wasn't clear.

So I redid all that. And Freddie came back in and said, 'Oh, I like what you've done with the guitar at the end. I want to make sure we mix it so the guitar is fighting with the vocal at every point at the end. It should be a battle!' And Freddie, when we were mixing it, had his hand on the guitar fader. Now, this is unusual, because usually he's got his fingers on the vocal and I've got my fingers on the guitar. But he said, 'No, I want to handle the guitar. I want to push that guitar to make sure it fights with the vocal'. So that's the way it was done.

So that song doesn't have a solo as such, and I don't think it's ever needed one. And the problem would be live. Once you started soloing extensively, the bottom would drop out of it. And I can do a lot with bluff on the night. I can make people think there's still a rhythm guitar there. But not for very long…

DON'T STOP ME NOW

It is not a particularly guitar-driven song – but that all changes two thirds of the way in, during the solo section. As with *We Are The Champions*, the song is in the key of F major, but the leads are performed three frets down using its relative minor D. As for the warm but ever-so-slightly quacky tone, it's most likely May was using his neck and middle pickups together with both set in phase – the Red Special with independent on/off sliders for each pickup, doubled by phase selectors underneath, giving him 27 different combinations in total, as well as more control via the volume and tone knobs.

Can you tell us how this song's solo came together?

Yes, it's quite funny. Freddie saw it very much as a piano song, *a la* Elton John, really. Powerhouse piano, powerhouse vocal, and that's it. So I played lots of rhythm guitar on it, and Freddie still said, 'No, no, no, no – it's a piano song!' That was a bit disappointing, but he did say, 'Well, it *does* need a solo. I need you to take over the vocal.' Which is what the way we thought about things. I said, 'Okay, give me a verse and let me see what I can do.' And again, being in the studio and hearing it evolve, I could sort of hear the solo in my head before

I actually picked up the guitar to do it. As very often with me, it's a kind of little diversion. It's a counter melody. It's not the actual tune of the verse. But it's something which goes with it, a sort of counterpoint, and it's something I could sing. And it was just a question of transferring it to a guitar. It's very simple. And I sometimes feel a bit apologetic about it. But I do notice that when it's played in the dancehall, it gets a reaction from people in the solo and it steps up the energy quite a bit, even from a song that's got high energy, so I'm happy with it the way it is.

It must be one of Queen's most popular songs.
It is now. It wasn't in the beginning. It was a sleeper and it grew. And worldwide now, it's a massive Queen song.

It's certainly one of those solos that takes the song to a whole new place, but why do you feel, as you say, apologetic for it?
Well, it's a little too typical, perhaps? Maybe that's why I feel kind of apologetic. But the funny thing is, I've had years and years to live with it, and every time the solo comes up live, I think, well, actually I can't do much better than that! So I tend to play it more or less as it is on the record – with little variations. But it just works as a as a counter melody for the for the main melody.

As a listener, it does seem like the ear draws you in to that melody. You kind of want to hear it once you know the song.
That's what I feel. I feel like the audience is singing along to it, and it would be disappointing to them if I didn't play it!

THEN AND NOW
Top left: Brian rocking the Red Special
Below: In more reflective mood during The Rhapsody Tour

WE WILL ROCK YOU

In its original form, Brian's monumental anthem is arguably Queen at their most minimalistic – with no melodic information to accompany the vocals until its final 30 seconds. First the guitarist rings out some feedback (an E note, to be precise) and then strikes a C powerchord before introducing some ideas in open position A that recur an octave up around the 14th fret. May then juxtaposes an D/A shape against the straight major chord, adding melodies using the higher strings – almost as if he's playing rhythm and lead at the same time. The faster, guitar-driven version which opens 1979's *Live Killers* omits this outro section and reimagines the song in E minor.

I'd like to talk about the live version of *We Will Rock You* that features on the *Live Killers* album as the opening track. It's fast and furious and almost punky in its attack.
That came about because of trying to visualise the openings and closings of a Queen show. That's always something I've been very involved in. It's one of the areas that inspires me. I like to create an event. And, of course, you play a lot of songs during the course of an evening, but the opening of the show is an event, and the closing of the show is also something that's going to stick in people's mind. So it's always fascinated me, I've always been drawn to it.

So, [the fast version] came about from thinking about how we could start the show. At this point, *We Will Rock You* already featured at the end of the show, but I thought, what would the audience be like if we started the show with *We Will Rock You*? And if we start the show with *We Will Rock You*, how do we go about it? Basically, they want to rock; they want to just rock out at that point. And so I could hear in my head a fast version of *We Will Rock You* – a sort of all-out punky-type version, as you say. And it happened very quickly. We just tried it out and it worked in rehearsal, and that became the opening of the show for that period. It worked out great. Much later, we did an adaptation of it for the *We Will Rock You* musical; that's what plays when the actors come forward and take their bows, and it worked out very well. And from time to time we just fancy playing it fast. And sometimes we have other people that fancy playing it. Dave Grohl is very fond of it, so we did that with him at the Taylor Hawkins tribute show. It's just an easy thing to play. It's got a lot of slog in it. It's got a lot of energy and power. And not too much thought! And it's something which is… just, there. And it's always a nice place to go.

ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST

Bassist John Deacon – affectionately referred to as Deacy – wrote a handful of the band's biggest hits, including this Chic-influenced track from Queen's 1980 album *The Game*. What's more, it was Deacon who played the funk rhythm guitar on this track, with Brian contributing rock licks. For the rhythm guitar parts, Deacon played an E minor chord rooted on the seventh fret of the fifth string, an A minor rooted on the seventh fret of the fourth string and another variant of same the chord in fifth position, sliding up from a fret down at the end of the phrase.

Am I right in thinking that this song is influenced by Chic and Nile Rodgers?
Yeah, this track is very much John Deacon world. That's what he was into. He was much more into funk than we were, and he brought that into our workings. It's very Deacy and it's very much influenced by Nile Rodgers.

So as a Deacy song, how influential was he in the whole arrangement? How much did he tell you what to play in this song?

"THE FAST VERSION OF WE WILL ROCK YOU HAS A LOT OF ENERGY AND POWER. NOT TOO MUCH THOUGHT!"

Well, I don't think I was in it at all to start off with! Because he's hell bent on getting what he wants. So it's his rhythm guitar playing – it's not mine. That very funky style, that's John. Oh yeah. And he wanted Roger to have a sort of disco-type sound. And it's all done on a loop, so Roger reluctantly put loads of tape on his drums and played very stiff, and Deacy made a loop out of it. So it starts to be unnatural at that point. It's a damn good loop, though, and it's beautiful. And Deacy did the bass, Deacy did the rhythm.

He worked with Freddie on the vocal. Deacy didn't sing, so he would tell Freddie what the words were, and play the tune on the guitar. You can imagine it was quite a strange process. Freddie absolutely adored it. He just stepped into it with a vengeance. And he sang it until he bled! He was forcing himself to get those high notes and he loved it. Freddie really was such a driving force.

Because, to be honest, it wasn't going down very well with the rest of us. You know, Roger actually didn't want to have it on the album; didn't like it. It was much too funky and not enough rock for him. I was a bit on the fence. I kind of enjoyed it. But it obviously wasn't the rock that I would have been creating. And I remember saying, 'Look, it needs a little bit of something a bit more dirty on it.'

So I started playing these little bits of the more grungy guitar. I don't think the word 'grungy' existed in those days. But the distorted guitar is obviously me, and that punctuates it and gives it another dimension, takes it to a slightly more rocky place.

I remember Michael Jackson hearing it and saying, 'That's where I want to be. That's what I want to do.' And I think his whole album which followed [*Thriller*] was deeply influenced by *Another One Bites The Dust* and the fact that it straddled funk and rock. Michael came to the same place from a different direction. Very interesting!

Do you remember what guitar John played? Did he play your guitar?
Not my guitar, no. It was a Strat, I think. I'm pretty sure of that.

It's funny – it doesn't sound quintessentially Strat-y
I suppose it doesn't. Well, you can ask him – if you can get hold of him! You know, my memory is telling me it was a brand new Strat. At least that's the way I remember it. I think I can remember him playing it. It's not my style.

And when we do it live, that's one of the more difficult things I have to do. And I have to not try too hard, because it has to roll off the wrist in a very natural way. And you have to get the sound exactly right. It can't be too burned out or it doesn't work. It can't be too turned down or that doesn't work either. It's tricky to get that sort of real clean funky sound. It comes and goes with me. Sometimes I just do it my way.

Sometimes I veer back more to the way of John's playing. I always think about John when I'm playing it – always. I can't be John, you know, nobody can be someone else. So I do it my way. And I can edge it up into being a little bit more dirty in some of the some of the parts where I'm playing with Adam. I enjoy doing it with Adam, he brings something different to it.

And the song, it's actually still evolving, which is quite something after all these years. So every time we do it, it gets a little bit of a different drift. And I enjoy it a lot more these days. Because we have made it our own I suppose. It's quite heavy. And we do it early in the set at the moment, which is quite adventurous. It's in the sort of rock part of the set, which in the beginning you never would have thought.

That song is a very important part of the Queen canon. It's perhaps our biggest song ever in terms of sales. I'm not sure, but it must be close.

"ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST NEEDED MORE GRUNGY GUITAR!"

"HE JUST TURNED IT UP TO 11!"

Kirk Hammett chooses his favourite Queen song – and salutes the genius of Brian May

"*Dragon Attack*. Urgh! I love that song! Brian's guitar sounds so overly saturated on that song, more so than other songs. It's like he walked over to his f*cking tone booth and just turned it up to 11. Brian May has just such a wide reach. He's like David Gilmour. Both of those guys have such a wide, wide reach. They can play extremely just like beautiful! Or, man, they can just f*cking make you cry with their guitar solos, and the sense of melody that both David Gilmour and Brian May have is incredible, man. It's voice-like. Voice-like! And both those guys do an extremely great job of doing their singing through their guitar. It is hard to be specific because everything they have done is so great."

Photo Ross Halfin

CRAZY LITTLE THING CALLED LOVE

Written by Mercury in 10 minutes while he was lounging in a bath at the Bayerischer Hof Hotel in Munich, *Crazy Little Thing Called Love* was a tribute-of-sorts to early rockers Elvis Presley and Cliff Richard. By the singer's own admission, the restriction that came from his limited knowledge of the fretboard and chord shapes is what helped him write "a good song, I think". Brian complimented its lazy D Mixolydian feel with ad-libs inspired by Elvis Presley's guitarist James Burton. It's a rare example of him recording an electric that wasn't his Red Special, and there is more of a twang to his lines than usual.

Famously, you didn't use the Red Special on this song. What guitar did you use?
It's Roger's. And I think it's actually a [Fender] Broadcaster. I think it was one of those early sort of [Telecaster] prototypes, which they called a Broadcaster. I could be wrong, because Roger had a lot of those very rare guitars, and he just happened to have this one in the studio. I was actually going to do it on my guitar, because maybe if I set it to just the bridge pickup it sounds a lot like a Telecaster.

I remember saying to Mack, our producer, 'I want to make this sound like James Burton. This is a pastiche of rock 'n' roll. James Burton is my hero. This is a James Burton solo and it should sound like a Telecaster'. And Mack looked at me quizzically and said, 'Well, if you want it to sound like a Telecaster, why don't you play a Telecaster?' I thought, 'Okay!', and Roger just happened to have this other guitar, so I picked it up, and it yes, it had the right sound, obviously. The perfect sound.

And I think I did it through a Fender amp rather than my usual Voxes. So, yeah, that's the sound, and it worked out great.

FLASH

Unlike anything Queen had recorded before, there's a prog rock intensity to this May-penned theme for 1980 space adventure movie *Flash Gordon*. The piece features vocals from both Mercury and May, with drummer Roger Taylor providing the higher harmonies. As well as the usual fretwork on his Red Special, Brian was also responsible for all the piano work (an Imperial Bösendorfer Grand Piano with 97 keys instead of 88) and synths (performed on the Oberheim OB-X that he plays in the music video) – all of which layer together and combine into a retro-futuristic symphony that perfectly encapsulates the daredevil sci-fi spirit of the movie.

***Flash* is an interesting song. It almost sounds like a Freddie song, because it's so flamboyant. Was there a brief for this? Take us through the writing process...**
I was so immersed in the *Flash Gordon* project. I always loved that kind of '50s science fiction stuff anyway, and I was very aware that the way that the film was evolving was very comic book. It was very tongue in cheek. Very retro. Mike Hodges, the director, handled it that way in a very clever approach, I think.

Strangely enough, Mike didn't see eye to eye with the producer of the film, Dino De Laurentiis, who was the guiding force behind the whole thing. Dino saw it more as a serious epic, but it was Mike who said, 'No, you can't do that. It's got to have this element of fun and slightly taking the mickey out of itself.' In the end Mike won, and some of what I was trying to do with this track is to do a comic book in sound. That's exactly what it is. And it's slightly exaggerated. It's sort of little over-heroic, if you like. But it's fun and it's colourful.

But there is also a little undercurrent of something deeper in the lyrics: 'Just a man/With a man's courage.' That, to me, is what gives it its heart and soul, because there is something rather lovable about the character of Flash Gordon. He's so innocent. And there's this love affair going through the film as well, and I think you really warm to him as a character, even though he's unreal, he's a comic book character.

So that's what I tried to put in the song. And I wanted to make it something that people would just grab ahold of very easily, and I could hear [the vocal shout] 'Flash!' very quickly in my head. So it was just a question of realising it in the studio. I had a lot of fun with it.

SPACE JAM
Brian says of the movie theme song *Flash*: "I was trying to do a comic book in sound..."

And when you had the song finished, did Dino De Laurentiis like it?
Well, when we'd made all the tracks in demo form, having seen the rushes of the film, we had a session with Dino and Mike Hodges, all of us in Trident studios playing back what we done for the film. And Dino sat there with a face like iron. Like, 'I'm not sure if I like this?' And the last thing we played was *Flash* and he went, 'Yes, it's very good, but it's not for my film.' That was a mortal blow for me. I thought, 'I didn't encapsulate what the film needed'. But Mike took me aside and said, 'Don't worry, I'll sort him out. He will love it!' And the conclusion of the story is when we had the premiere of the film. Dino came over to me and said, 'Thank you for what you did for my film. It's beautiful!' So that was nice.

It perfectly encapsulates the vibe of the film.
Yeah, I'm very proud of it. It is very fluffy, but I'm proud of it because within my brief, within the genre, I think it does fit perfectly.

UNDER PRESSURE

Two of the biggest acts in rock music collaborated to produce a worldwide smash hit, giving Queen their second number one single and David Bowie his third. *Under Pressure* came from an impromptu jam at the Queen-owned Mountain facility in Montreux. The verses have May ringing out his open D against notes on the higher strings, followed by thicker-sounding open G and A7 shapes and overdriven chords from halfway in. The main bassline was sampled by Vanilla Ice for 1990 hit *Ice Ice Baby* – the first hip-hop single to top the US chart – although Queen and Bowie were not credited until after its success.

It's an unusual song in Queen's canon. Obviously, David Bowie featured, and it feels very much composed around the two vocalists. So how did you feel your part was played in that? What did you contribute to the song?
Well, it was a very complex process. And of course, it's the four of us plus David Bowie, who is a very persuasive force. And it was put together completely off the cuff. And David brought this technique in where everyone would go in and sing the way

they felt the song should go without thinking about it. And without listening to each other. And then there was a whole system of going through and picking out the bits that you liked from different people's vocals. So that's how the vocals were put together.

And David, in the end, wanted to be the guiding force as regards lyrics, and he ended up writing all those lyrics, with not much from us. And it was all done spontaneously in the studio very late at night after we had a meal and a lot of drinks. And it was a pretty heavy backing track. When it gets to 'Why can't we give love', we were all working on it together, and it sounded like The Who. It sounded massively chord-driven. And I was beaming because I liked The Who. I remember saying to David, 'Oh, it sounds like The Who, doesn't it?' He says, 'Yeah, well it's not going to sound like The Who by the time I've finished with it!' You know, in a joking kind of way. But he didn't want it to be that way.

It was very difficult to mix because we all had different ideas of how it should be mixed. I think it's probably the only time in my career I bowed out, because I knew it was going to be a fight. So basically it was Freddie and David fighting it out in the studio with the mix. And what happened in the mix was that most of that heavy guitar was lost. And even the main riff, I played that electric, pretty much in the sort of arpeggiated style which I do live now. But that never made it into the mix. What they used was the acoustic bits which were done first as a sort of demo.

I never liked it, to be honest, the way it was mixed. But I do recognise that it works. It's a point of view, and it's done very well. And people love it. So we play it quite a bit different live, as you probably noticed, it is a lot heavier and I think it benefits from it. I mean, David was an awesome creative force. But you can't have too many awesome creative forces in the same room. It starts to get very difficult! Something has to give.

You might say that in some respects it doesn't even sound all that much like a Queen song. You know, as you say, in the sound of the overall mix.
Yeah, if I'd mixed it, it would have sounded very different. And maybe it wouldn't have been a hit. Who knows?

It's surprising to hear you say that it was so improvised.
Oh, completely improvised! There was no prior writing whatsoever. The only thing we had was the bass riff. We started off before dinner, and John had this nice bass riff, and when we came back there was a dispute. We said, 'Let's try and build on that nice bass riff.' But no one could remember how it had gone – least of all Deacy, who'd had more to drink that most of us! So there was a lot of discussion, and I remember David stepping in at one point and saying, 'No, no, it wasn't like that – it was like this!' And so to this day, I don't know if that riff the same one that we had before dinner, but it's the one that ended up on the record!

A KIND OF MAGIC

The third single from the album of the same name was penned by Roger Taylor for 1986 fantasy action film *Highlander*, with many references to the film in its lyrics. Its stand-out guitar parts include the same kind of chord motif heard in *We Will Rock You*, once again played around the 14th fret, and the faster licks in A Mixolydian and A major heard near the end of the song. *A Kind Of Magic* was the album that followed Queen's legendary show-stealing performance at Live Aid in 1985, and it was the sound of a band full of confidence and creativity.

We've tabbed *A Kind Of Magic* in this issue. It's quite a shreddy song with some really fast licks towards the end. Can you give some tips as to how you'd approach playing them?
I don't usually play them these days! I just like to go off and do my own thing, really. It's opportunity to have some fun with it. And if I was actually going to play those licks, it would be like being in a straitjacket because they're difficult to play and I would be worried about my fingers being in the right place – and I don't enjoy that! I'd much prefer to just do what comes into my head. And that's one of the places in the show these days where I have no idea what I'm going to play when I get to that solo. And I like it to be that way, so it can go anywhere.

I also have an extra weapon, which is the rocket I use. You know, we fire rockets during this song. I fire the rocket. It's a childish toy, but it means that I can fire rockets in the air exactly the way I always dreamed of doing it when we made the video for that song. The video has the guitar with fireworks coming out of the top of it, and I always thought would it be great to do that live. Well, we could do that now! Yes, it is childish, but it gives me such a lot of pleasure. And I can do it whenever I want. It's a surprise for the audience. And the solo builds itself around that.

So, those are the little peaks where the rockets come out. And I kind of fill in the gaps and try to lead the audience towards wondering what's going to happen next. I have a lot of fun with it really. To me, it's a lot better than kind of showing off and doing the fast stuff. There is a little bit of fast stuff still in it, but it's basically playing with the audience. That's what I like to do at that point.

LET ME ENTERTAIN YOU...
Brian has the best seat in the house

So do you have some special modification to one of your guitars?
Yes, there's one particular guitar which has it all built into it – or built on to it, I should say. It's a lot of fun, and the audience love it. Sometimes the simple tricks are the best. Like the mirrorball. Everybody loves a mirrorball. Which we use in the solo for *I Want To Break Free*. It gets a huge round of applause, and they're not applauding me – they're applauding the mirrorball!

THESE ARE THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES

In this beautiful synth-driven ballad, written by Roger Taylor, the lyrics reflected on the band's shared experiences early on and the love that brought them together. The video was filmed in black and white, with a frail-looking Freddie Mercury at the very final stages of his life. Although the use of rhythm guitar in this track is fairly sparse, there are some incredibly melancholic lead lines from May halfway in – starting in A natural minor and then phrases in D minor which repeat a whole tone up in E minor – and more passages wrapped around Mercury's vocals towards the end.

Let's talk about the solo in there. I love the tone, the delay effects...

"FREDDIE AND I THOUGHT WE WOULD DO LOVE OF MY LIFE AS THE TWO OF US WITH AN ACOUSTIC GUITAR. AND IT GRADUALLY GREW INTO SOMETHING WHICH STOOD UP ON ITS OWN"

"I FIRE ROCKETS DURING A KIND OF MAGIC. THE SOLO BUILDS ITSELF AROUND THAT NOW"

Well, it's a very delicate song and I was aware it had to be a very delicate solo. I started experimenting with the delays live, so it's not like we put an effect on the solo afterwards – I was playing using those effects to make little harmonies, as I've fairly frequently done, but this was a very different atmosphere from anything we've ever done before.

And those little arpeggiated runs, I did very quickly as an experiment. But as soon as I'd done it, I liked it. That's the second part of the solo that I'm talking about. I remember sitting with Freddie and him going, 'Oh, yeah. That's nice. You know, when you get that together it'll be quite good!' And I thought, I actually don't want to change it. I said to him, 'I quite like it the way it is.' And he came around, eventually; he liked it too.

Of course, it's Roger's track, so Roger is going to have the ultimate say as to whether it goes on or not, and he liked it so that's the way we kept it. And that guitar is woven into the whole song. It's not just in the solo. It does little duets with a vocal all the way through. It's quite delicately woven, that song, and I love it. I think it's probably Roger's best song ever. It's a beautiful song.

Are you mixing up picking and fingerpicking in this song?

It's not fingerpicking, actually. It's just very delicately played with a pick, mainly. I wasn't so much into using my fingers in those days. But the solo is; oh, yes, you're right. I am doing it with the soft part of my fingers. I beg your pardon. You're right. I'd forgotten!

DRAGON ATTACK

This powerful deep cut from 1980 album *The Game* is another example of Queen taking influence from the funk sounds that were popular at the time. But it's more rock than disco – sounding almost like the kind of riff Thin Lizzy would have come up with in the mid-to-late '70s, in this case built around the D minor pentatonic scale. Breaking down the solo in his 1983 *Starlicks* instructional video, Brian explained how "with that particular screaming tone setting and also by hitting the string with your pick and the thumb, you can get those octave harmonics coming out, which gives it a bit more tension and screams a little more."

Kirk Hammett tells us that *Dragon Attack* is his favourite Queen song. I'd love to get your reflections on it...

Well, I love it too! It's got such an amazing feel. We were in that funk place, but this one has a real kind of rock-funk feel. And again, it started off very spontaneously, me playing along with Deacy. And, probably, it was more Deacy's riff than mine, to be honest. But I took hold of it and built it into the song that it became.

It came out of spontaneity, and it came out of, I think, wanting to play the kind of music which was inspiring us when we would go down to the rock disco after work in Munich every night. We used to go to a place called the Sugar Shack, and it was definitely a sort of rock club, a rock dance club, if you like. And generally they would play Queen music, but when Queen music came on it didn't work so well, it didn't inspire people to get up and go nuts on the dancefloor, whereas a lot of other things did – songs that had a lot more space in them.

So what I tried to do with *Dragon Attack* was make it the kind of track which was going to work in the Sugar Shack. That's totally what it was about, which was to get girls excited and make boys want to get up and go nuts with them on the dance floor there. So it's very spacious. The song doesn't have the usual kind of rhythm build-up. It's just the riff – bass, drums, guitar. Very open, very stark. And the lyric also comes from the Sugar Shack, if you want to know what that's about?

LIVE KILLER
Brian on Queen's US tour in 1979

Who wouldn't?

The dragons are in the sugar shack. It's about that strange twilight world where you stay till the lights come on in the morning, and you come out and it's dawn! It was a pretty wild time for us, and that's what I attempted to put in the song. It's all about us and the way things were, and the sort of sexy side of the peripherals of rock. That track was designed to be uniquely a dance track. So you have *Another One Bites The Dust* and *Dragon Attack* which are both big departures from the way Queen had come up.

I remember touring after we finished the record, and American radio picked up on those songs just like that. We never expected they would. We thought they would want just the rock tracks. But they picked up on that stuff and it was all over! Every time we got into a limo or car or a restaurant or whatever, they wouldn't be playing those tracks. And it's interesting – it was the same time as The Rolling Stones put out *Miss You*, which is also very funky; very different for them. Rock was becoming funky for a while. And it worked!

A lot of people said that [Queen's 1982 album] *Hot Space* didn't work, but it actually did. It brought people to a new place. And it gave birth to Michael Jackson doing his incredible stuff – and later, Michael Jackson inviting Slash to play on a track with him. All that sort of stuff. It was that fusion of funk and rock which I think lives with us to this day.

Words, guitars and backing Charlie Griffiths

ROCK YOU!

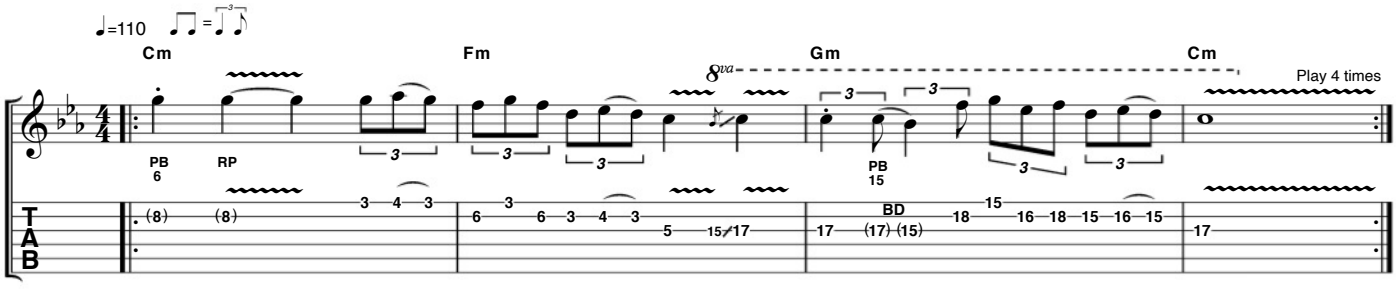
You've heard from the man who played 'em! Now, TG takes you through the techniques you need to know to play 13 of Queen's greatest songs

Brian May has been rocking Queen's repertoire for over 50 years now. And, though all four members of the band penned hit singles, it was Brian and original lead singer Freddie Mercury who took the lion's share of the writing credits. Before we get into the nitty gritty of Brian's trademark composition and playing techniques, it's worth taking a moment to think about that other key element of his unique sound: the homemade Red Special guitar.

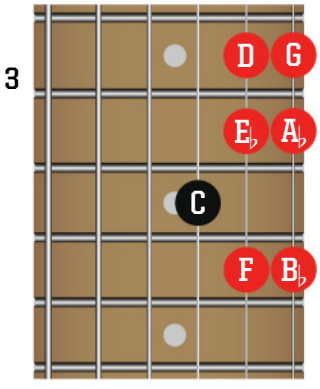
Though equipped with 'off the shelf' Burns pickups, its body, neck and sophisticated electronic switching system were all bespoke, designed and built by Brian and his father, Harold. Factor in Brian's choice of a sixpence piece as a pick and you have a tone that's near impossible to recreate.

That said, diehard Queen fans could invest in a BMG Red Special guitar and a Vox AC30 amp, and there are modelling options, too. Almost any digital multi-fx unit will have an AC30 model. And do check out IK Multimedia's Amplitube Brian May, which not only models the AC30, but also the Red Special itself, and the band's studio secret weapon, the 'Deacy' amp, which was key to many of Brian's violin-esque sounds. Right, let's take a look at Brian's kind of magic…

01 KILLER QUEEN SOLO TECHNIQUE: PRE-BEND AND TRADEMARK VIBRATO **bit.ly/tg381audio**



This is a subtle but important element of the Brian May style and you'll hear it right at the beginning of *KQ*'s solo. Here, in our lick, start by pre-bending the 6th fret up a tone to hit a G note. Brian employs this technique to allow his vibrato to go below the pitch of the note (whereas a wobble of a string in its rested position *raises* the pitch).

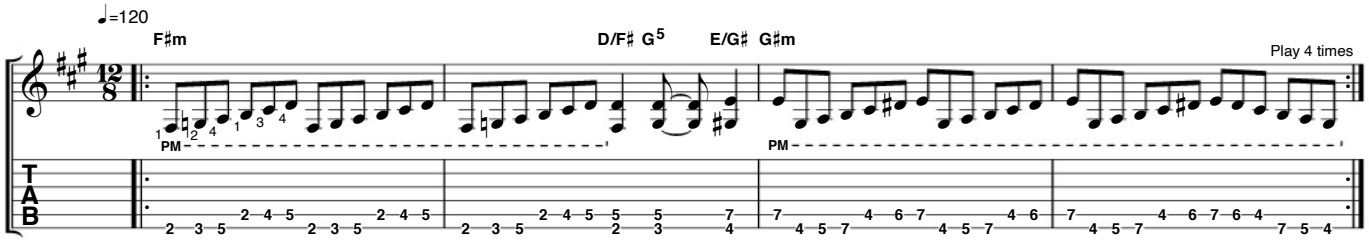


C NATURAL MINOR SCALE

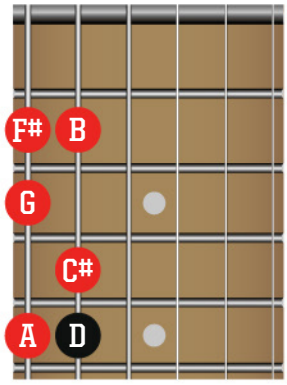
This C natural minor shape has the root note on the third string and is played using all four fingers in a one-finger-per-fret fashion. Brian employs it in bars 3 and 4 of his solo and we've used it here. Try playing it twelve frets higher up the neck to attempt Brian's octave-up phrasing.

Photo Bojan Hohnjec/© Miracle Productions LLP

02 BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY HEAVY RIFF BREAK TECHNIQUE: THREE-NOTE-PER-STRING RIFFING bit.ly/tg381audio



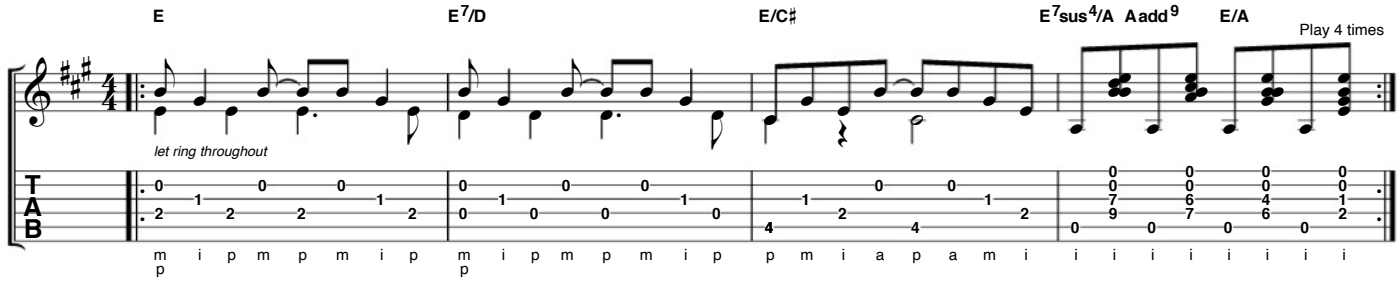
Brian admits himself that he still finds *Bo Rhap*'s heavy riff (coming in after the opera section) a challenge – perhaps because it was penned for piano by Freddie Mercury. Our simpler version shows you that you'll need two three-note fingering patterns: 1 2 4 (on the sixth string) and 1 3 4 (fifth string). Use alternate picking and, if you use a coin as a pick, use the serrated edge to create the signature Brian gritty pick attack.



D MAJOR SCALE

The original track was a semitone higher than this in E♭, but we've stayed in D to make it a friendlier key for guitar. Take note of the fingering pattern on each string and practise running up and down the notes in order.

03 LOVE OF MY LIFE THROUGHOUT TECHNIQUE: FINGERSTYLE ACOUSTIC bit.ly/tg381audio



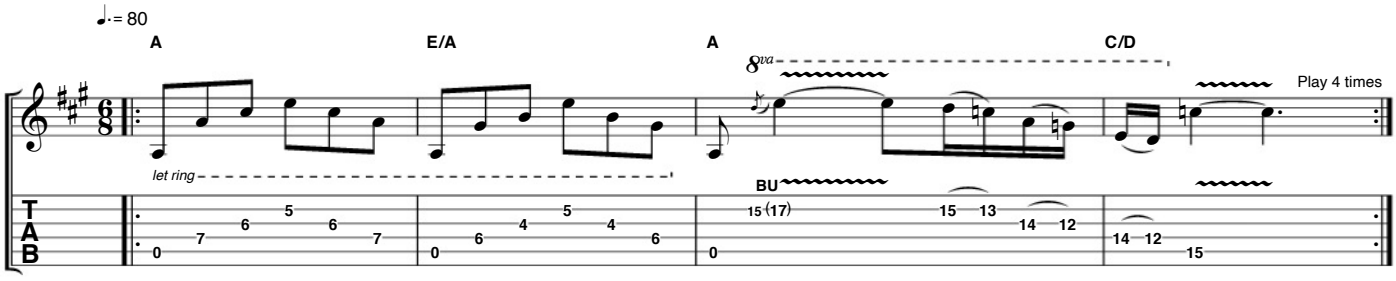
The original track is primarily piano-led. However, in live shows, Brian typically expands on the acoustic part heard in the recorded intro to provide guitar accompaniment to vocalist Freddie Mercury and, later, Adam Lambert. We're showcasing the fingerstyle technique here, so pay attention to the pima instructions under the tab which tell you the relevant fingers to use.

PIMA DIRECTIONS

Whether you're playing our short example or tackling a full tab of a live performance of Queen's song, you'll need to get to grips with fingerstyle. The basic principle is to use your thumb (p) for the three bass strings, and your index (i), middle (m) and ring (a) fingers for the top three strings respectively. The little finger (c) is supposedly rarely used, at least according to 'classical' technique. But you're free to make any practical adjustments to pick anything you need to – including making use of the pinkie!

04 WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS CHORUSES CHANGING FROM RHYTHM TO LEAD

bit.ly/tg381audio



With Queen being a one-guitar band, Brian frequently needs to seamlessly switch between rhythm and lead guitar parts, often in a 'question and answer' style with the vocal – and *WATC* is a great example, featuring a patchwork of arpeggios, heavy chords, riffs and lead lines artfully stitched together. Take care here in our riff as we switch from arpeggios to soloing. You might want to kick in a little overdrive midway through, too.

05 DON'T STOP ME NOW SOLO TECHNIQUE: BENDS, PRE-BENDS AND SLURS

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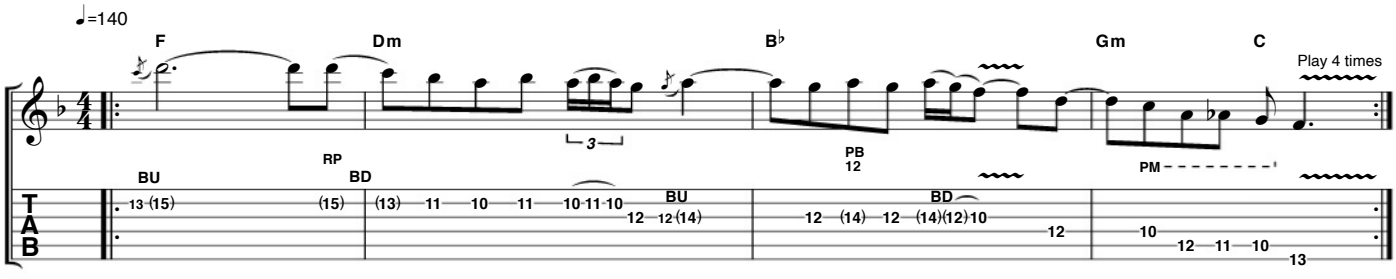
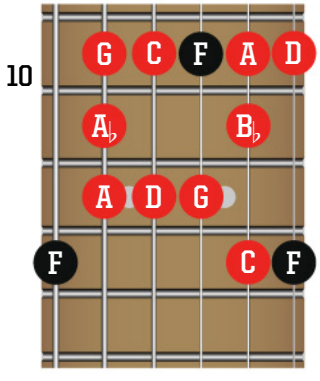


Like the original, our *DSMN*-inspired lick is in F major and uses bends and pre-bends (plus brief hammer-on/pull-off slurs) to make the melody more vocal-like. As you bend the string, listen closely to each one to ensure perfect tuning and take note of your hand position so you can apply it to the pre-bends (which, remember, you don't hear until it's too late and you've already bent the string!).



F MAJOR BLUES SCALE

Play the sixth-string root note with your fourth finger and use your first finger to play the notes on the 10th fret, employing one finger per fret to complete the shape. This is essentially an F major pentatonic scale (F G A C D) with added 4th (B♭) and ♭3 (A♭) intervals which Brian uses to add melody.

06 WE WILL ROCK YOU OUTRO TECHNIQUE: I-IV CHORD CHANGE

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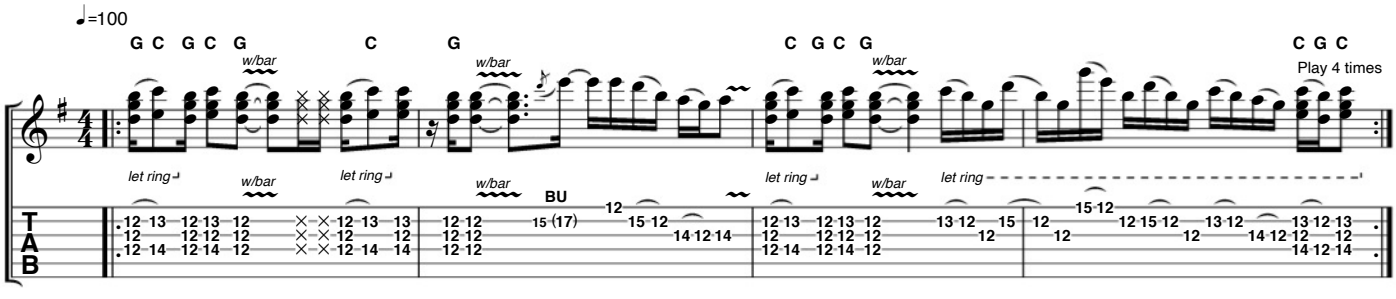
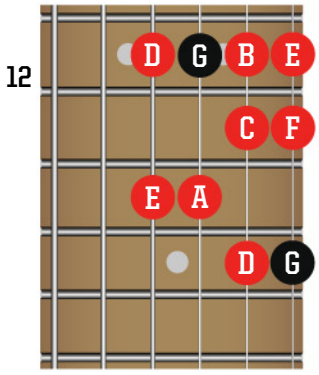


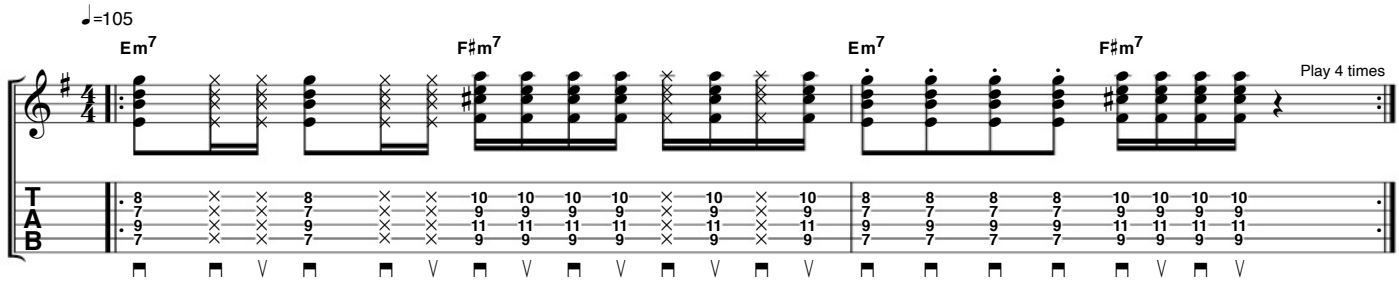
The iconic *WWRY* guitar solo features one of Brian's signature chord changes (he also employs it in *Hammer To Fall*, for example), which starts with a first-finger barre, followed by a second- and third-finger hammer-on. It gives a quick change between two major chords (G to C here in our example), but it can be moved to any key by shifting the shape up and down the fretboard.



G MIXOLYDIAN MODE

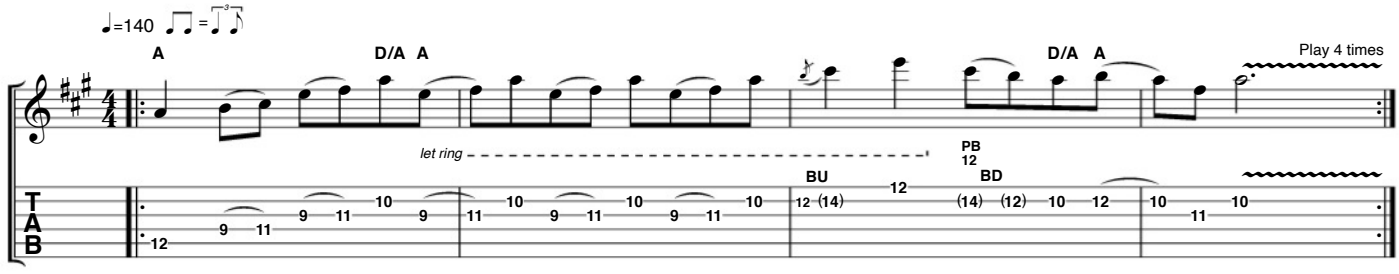
In *WWRY*'s solo Brian plays melodic licks in and around his chord change. So, instead of playing every note of G Mixolydian one by one, here, keep a first-finger barre at the 12th fret and use your other fingers to target the other notes as you please.

07 ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST VERSES 2 AND 3 TECHNIQUE: FUNK RHYTHM 16THS **bit.ly/tg381audio**

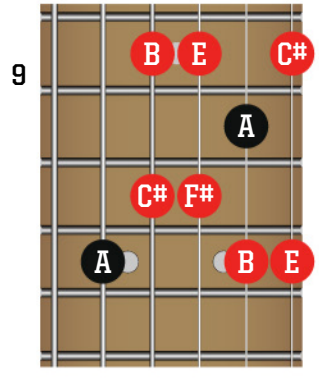


John Deacon's two-chord Stratocaster funk vamp is a super-tight 16th-note groove. That means you'll be playing with constant alternating down and upstrokes while varying the pressure of your fretting fingers to play full chords or muted sounds. We've kept things simple for you, using the same shape for two chords. Note that John's original part changes to a 5th position Am and is a little more complex.

08 CRAZY LITTLE THING CALLED LOVE SOLO TECHNIQUE: ROCKABILLY LEAD **bit.ly/tg381audio**



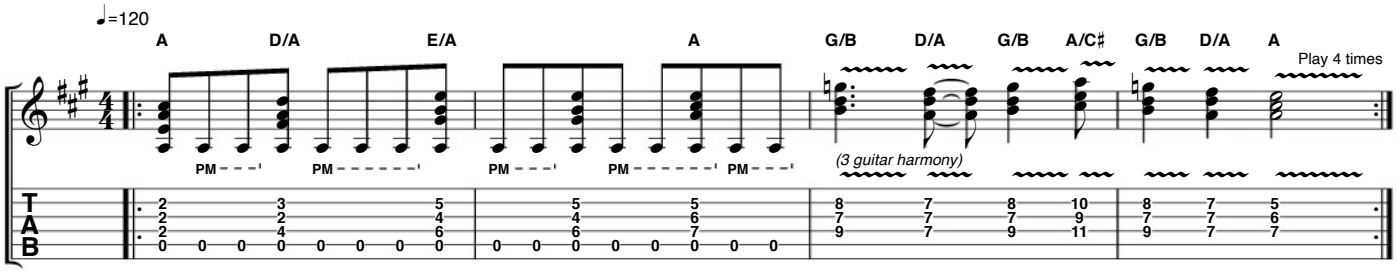
We're aping Brian's rockabilly stylings here in our shuffle-feel lick. Say "Humpty Dumpty, Humpty Dumpty" to roughly approximate the timing of the shuffle – or listen to our audio, of course. Once you've got the idea, try applying this to the notes in the tab. Take care not to rush the hammer-ons. You can easily lose the shuffle feel if you are not careful.



A MAJOR PENTATONIC SCALE

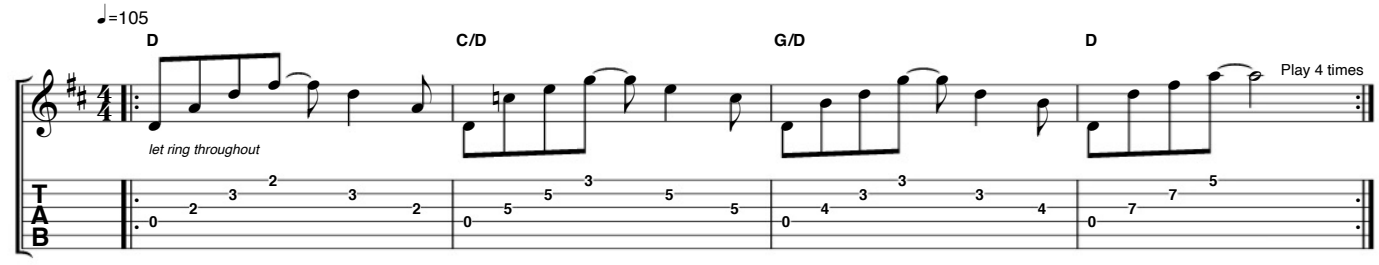
Our lick is played over an A major backing and the country/rockabilly harmony owes a lot to the bright sound of the major pentatonic scale (1 2 3 5 6) used here. Use the fourth finger to play the root note on the 12th fret, and a one-finger-per-fret style for the remainder of the shape.

09 FLASH SOLO THROUGHOUT TECHNIQUE: HARMONISED LICKS **bit.ly/tg381audio**



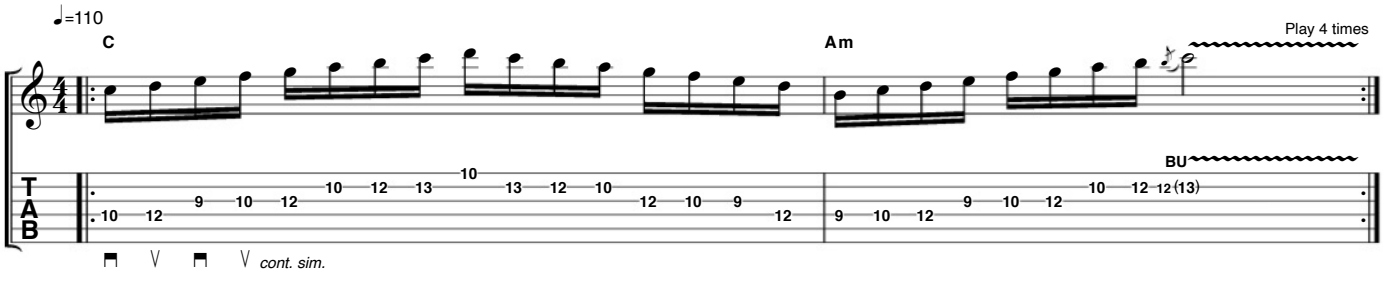
"Flash, ah-ah! Saviour of the universe!" ...And we all know what comes next: Brian's signature harmonised guitar lines, which is what we're looking at here. Bars 3 and 4 show a three-guitar harmony with each guitar assigned to its own string. Essentially, this arrangement is the same as playing triads, but the added vibrato and stereo panning creates a beautiful, singing harmony that sounds totally different from the chordal approach.

10 UNDER PRESSURE THROUGHOUT TECHNIQUE: ARPEGGIOS **bit.ly/tg381audio**

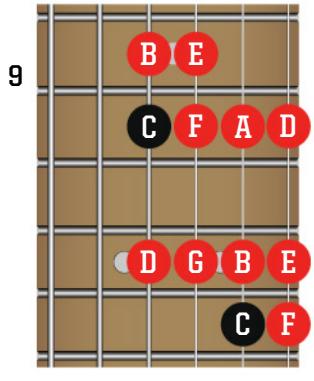


Brian very often uses triad shapes on the higher strings, which perhaps stems from his earliest days of learning chord shapes on the ukulele before picking up the guitar, and *Under Pressure* features this style of playing throughout. The triads here in our simpler example are from the D Mixolydian mode (D E F♯ G A B C) and are played as slash chords over the open D root note.

11 A KIND OF MAGIC SOLO TECHNIQUE: FAST LEAD RUNS **bit.ly/tg381audio**



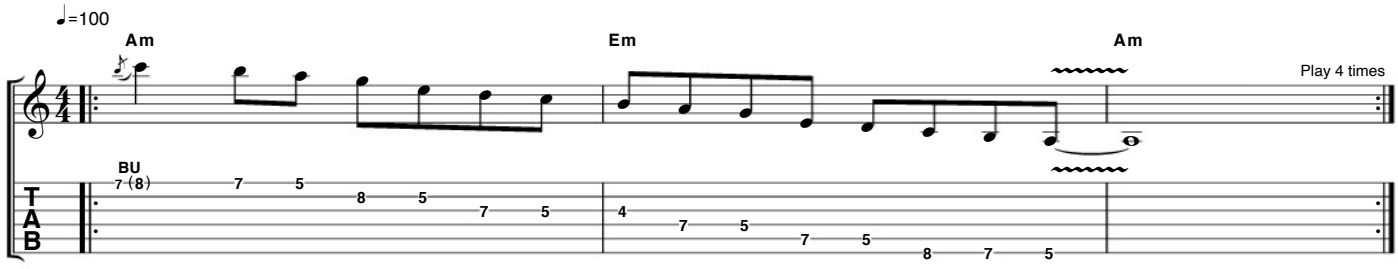
The 16th-note runs in *AKOM* are some of the slickest lead lines Brian ever recorded. Turn to p68 to learn them in our full transcription, or ready yourself with this shorter idea here. Based in C major, ascend and descend the lick evenly using down-up-style alternate picking. It's quite relentless stuff, so we recommend attempting just four or eight notes at first, looping each phrase to build accuracy. Make sure to start slowly, too!



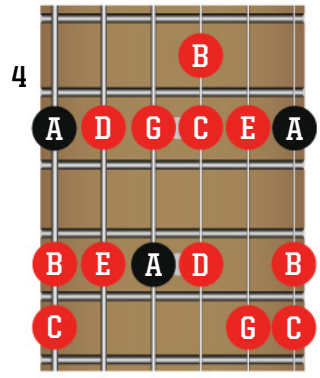
C MAJOR SCALE

A simple C major scale it may be, but this shape comes with its own challenge: a position change as you reach the second string. You only have to move up one fret, though, so it's not too bad. Just take it slowly, playing from low to high at a slow enough tempo that you don't make mistakes.

12 THESE ARE THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES SOLO TECHNIQUE: TIMED DELAY EFFECT **bit.ly/tg381audio**



Here, we're looking at Brian's approach to the cascading licks in this beautiful song's emotive solo. You'll be descending through the scale using even eighth notes until you arrive at the A root note. The all-important delay effect is added with the repeat set to a quarter-note (600Mms at this tempo). This has the effect of a harmony being created between the played note and the delayed note.

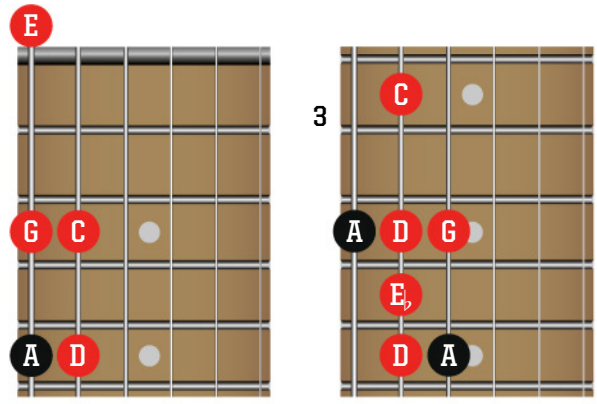


A MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE WITH ADDED 9TH

This scale shape is based on the traditional A minor pentatonic (A C D E G) with the root on the sixth string. Added to this is the 9th interval B note resulting in a hybrid six-note scale, somewhere in between the pentatonic and natural minor scales.

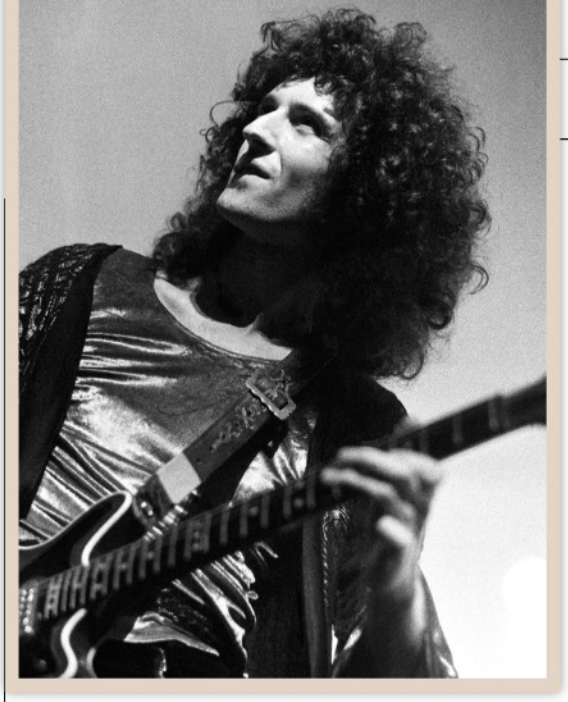
13 DRAGON ATTACK MAIN RIFF TECHNIQUE: SINGLE-NOTE FUNK LINES **bit.ly/tg381audio**

This riff, inspired by Brian-penned funk-rocker *Dragon Attack*, is played in unison with the bass and features syncopated 16th-notes to create the groove. Keeping your picking hand moving constantly in a down-up, 16th-note fashion will really help you stay locked in with the bass and drums.



A BLUES SCALE

Our riff is based in the A blues scale (A C D E♭ E G), with the notes arranged on the lowest strings and using the open E and A notes as pedal tones.



Video Lesson Jamie Hunt

VIDEO GA GA!

TG presents three classic Queen riff lessons for you to watch and learn from

If the last 26 pages of royal finery have left you itching to try your hand at a few Queen tunes then read on as we take a look at some of Brian May's finest guitar parts. We've created three bite-sized video riff lessons, taking you through a short section of each song, *Tie Your Mother Down*, *Stone Cold Crazy* and *It's Late*.

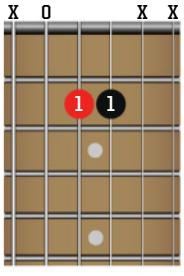
TG tutor Jamie Hunt takes you note by note through each riff so you can be sure you're getting all the details down. So plug in your guitar and head to the link shown above – you'll be playing along in no time!

01 TIE YOUR MOTHER DOWN

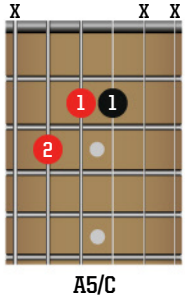
This is a Brian May-penned, good old-fashioned shuffle-feel rock 'n' roll tune with a riff based around an open A5 powerchord. You'll need to barre the fretted notes of the A5 with your first finger – this'll free up your remaining digits to play the notes and chords that follow. With the A5 powerchord in place, play a downstroke to sound the lower notes of the chord, followed by an upstroke to deliver the higher notes. Next, we move on to a C note played at the 3rd fret of the fifth string. Here, you'll want to bend the note slightly sharp before pulling off to the open fifth string. The phrase concludes with an additional upstroke on the A5 powerchord. The whole thing cycles around six times before ending on G5, D, Csus2, G/B chord stabs at the end of each riff. To make the closing chords stand out, use downstrokes and decent amount of pick attack.

Appears at: 1:02-1:24
Tempo: 132bpm
Key/Scale: A Mixolydian/Dorian
Main Techniques: Down- and up-strumming, pull-offs, powerchords, fret-hand muting

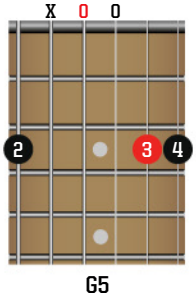
TG TIP: To get the shuffle feel, count along to the music with each beat divided into three (say: 1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a – it'll be quite quick!). Your downstrokes should be on the numbers and your upstrokes on the 'a's.



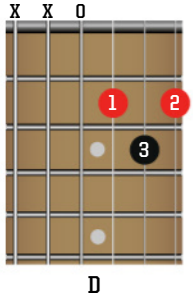
A5



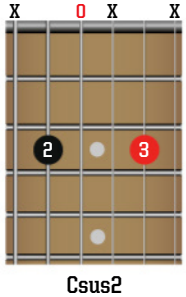
A5/C



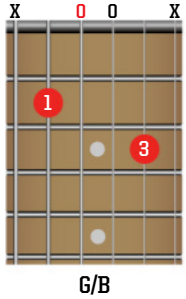
G5



D



Csus2



G/B

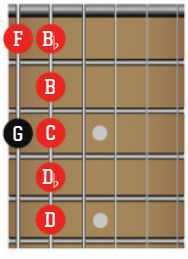
Photo Getty

02 STONE COLD CRAZY

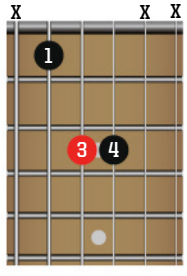
Though clocking in at barely two minutes long, *SCC* is one of Brian May's hardest rocking riff-outs – and here we're looking at the song's heavy intro. It's based in G minor but includes a handful of chromatic notes too. It all begins with a downstroke on an F note (1st fret, sixth string), followed by a hammer-on to a G at the 3rd fret. Here the G is played five more times, using alternate picking and palm-muting. Next up is a B♭ powerchord rooted at the 1st fret of the fifth string. From here, the F to G hammer-on is repeated and then moved over to the same frets on the fifth string, setting up the ascending chromatic sequence from B at the 2nd fret to a D note on the 5th fret. Use downstrokes to attack the ascending chromatic sequence, but change to an upstroke on the final D note. This strategy resets the direction of your picking hand, ready to start the riff over again on a downstroke. To bring further variety and energy to the riff, the two opening phrases are played an octave higher as the riff repeats.

Appears at: 0:05-0:22
Tempo: 230bpm
Key/Scale: G minor
Main Techniques: Alternate picking, palm muting, hammer-ons

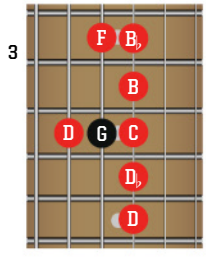
TG TIP: All of the single-note lines take place on the two bass strings. Keep these idle strings silent throughout by angling your fretting fingers to touch them and prevent them from ringing out.



Low riff notes



B♭5



High riff notes

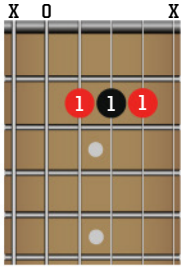
03 IT'S LATE

Though known for its heavy chorus, we're looking here at the intricate cleaner guitar work in this song's intro and verses. It's quite detailed, so check out the video for our note-by-note run through. The intro kicks off with a four-note line played before an onbeat A chord. Play this A with a first-finger barre – most of the variations that come next (a D/F♯ chord and some single-note lines) are played by the other fingers with the barre in place.

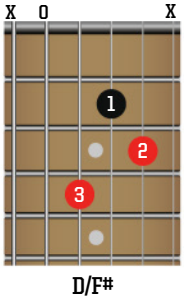
The structure is a little complex: essentially, it's a two-bar riff played four times, followed by a fifth time with an alternate ending, a four-bar 'middle section' with chord changes (A, C♯sus4, C♯, F♯m), then the riff again with a new alternate ending, and, finally, two bars of powerchord stabs before the chorus. That's 18 bars in all. And that's not counting the opening four-note line, which we're treating as an anacrusis in this context. Geddit? Don't worry, it's easier than it sounds. Once you've got the main two-bar riff down you'll be good.

Appears at: 0:16-1:05
Tempo: 85bpm
Key/Scale: A major
Main Techniques: Percussive 'scratch' notes, Accenting notes with the picking hand, hammer-ons and pull-offs

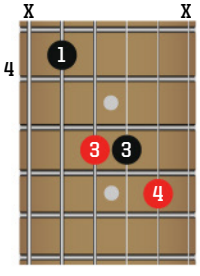
TG TIP: When playing through the sections of this sequence, accent the notes or chords that land on the first beat of each bar. This helps to differentiate the phrases while keeping the timing consistent.



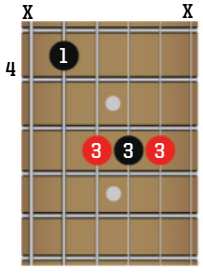
A



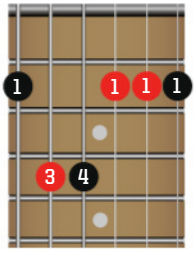
D/F♯



C♯sus4



C♯



F♯m

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QUEEN

A KIND OF MAGIC

Lose your head over this magically immortal 1986 classic

Photo Getty **Guitars and backing** Charlie Griffiths

Queen's 1986 album *A Kind of Magic* was written as the soundtrack to the classic movie *Highlander*, with its famous tagline, 'there can be only one' – a lyric from this Roger Taylor-penned song. Ironically though, there are actually two versions of the track; the movie version and the album arrangement, which was reworked by Freddie Mercury.

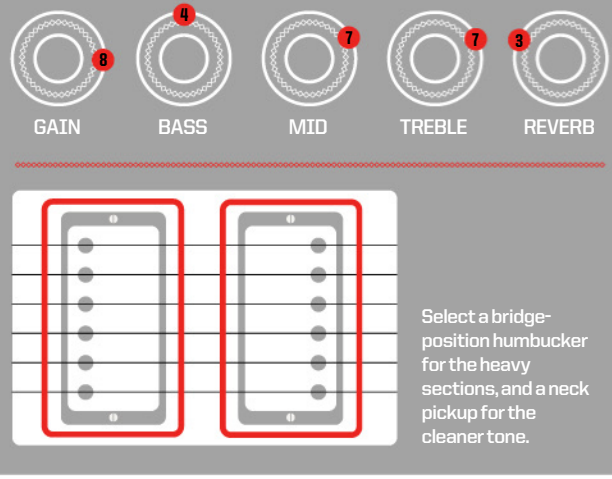
Our transcription here is of the better known album version, which features some iconic playing by Brian May – but do watch out for the tricky 16th note licks in the outro solo. These are a challenge even for Brian himself. Finally, note that in areas of the song where the guitar is absent we've added parts based on how Brian fills out the song live.

SOUND ADVICE

Everything you need to know before playing *A Kind Of Magic*

GET THE TONE

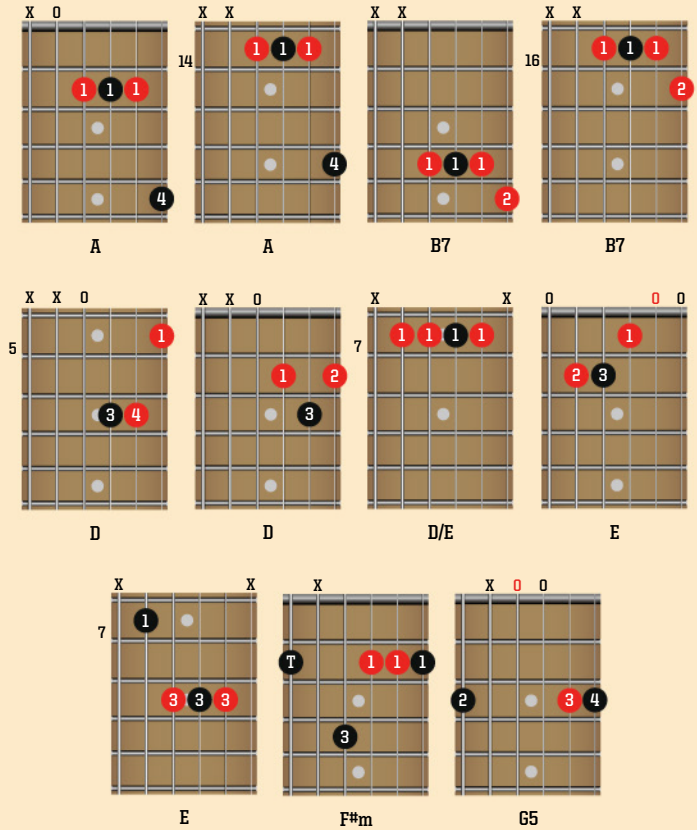
CHANNEL OVERDRIVE



There are two main tones in this track. For the rock sound, Brian used his Red Special guitar with the bridge and middle pickups in the parallel setting for a humbucking tone, plugged into his treble boost pedal and Vox AC30 amp. For the clean tone, use the mellower neck pickup and add some reverb. Brian also used a chorus effect which adds dimension and texture. Ideally you should use an old English Sixpence as a pick, as this adds a unique metallic clang to the tone.

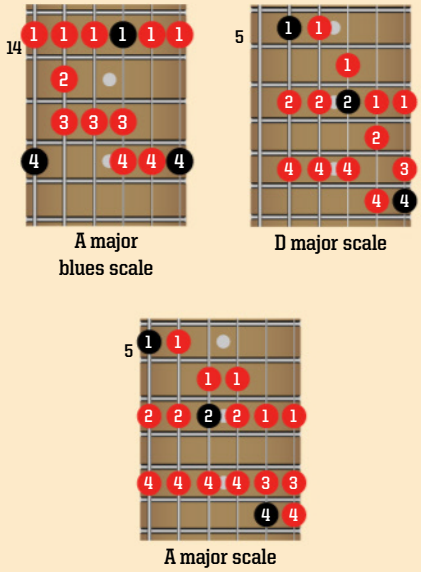
CHORDS

Most of the song is comprised of major chords (A, B7, D, E and G) with each one played in one or two different positions or sometimes stripped down to root-5th powerchords. For six-string barre chords like the F#m, Brian usually frets the sixth string with his thumb, mutes the fifth string, and plays the highest four strings with his fingers.



SCALES

Most of the ad-libbed licks throughout the song and the first solo are based around the A major blues scale, which is essentially the A major pentatonic scale with an added minor 3rd (1 2 ♭3 4 6). For the second solo Brian outlines the D to A chord changes with a two-guitar arrangement switching between the D major and A major scale in different octaves.



QUEEN
A KIND OF MAGIC

FULL TAB

A KIND OF MAGIC
Words and Music by Roger Taylor
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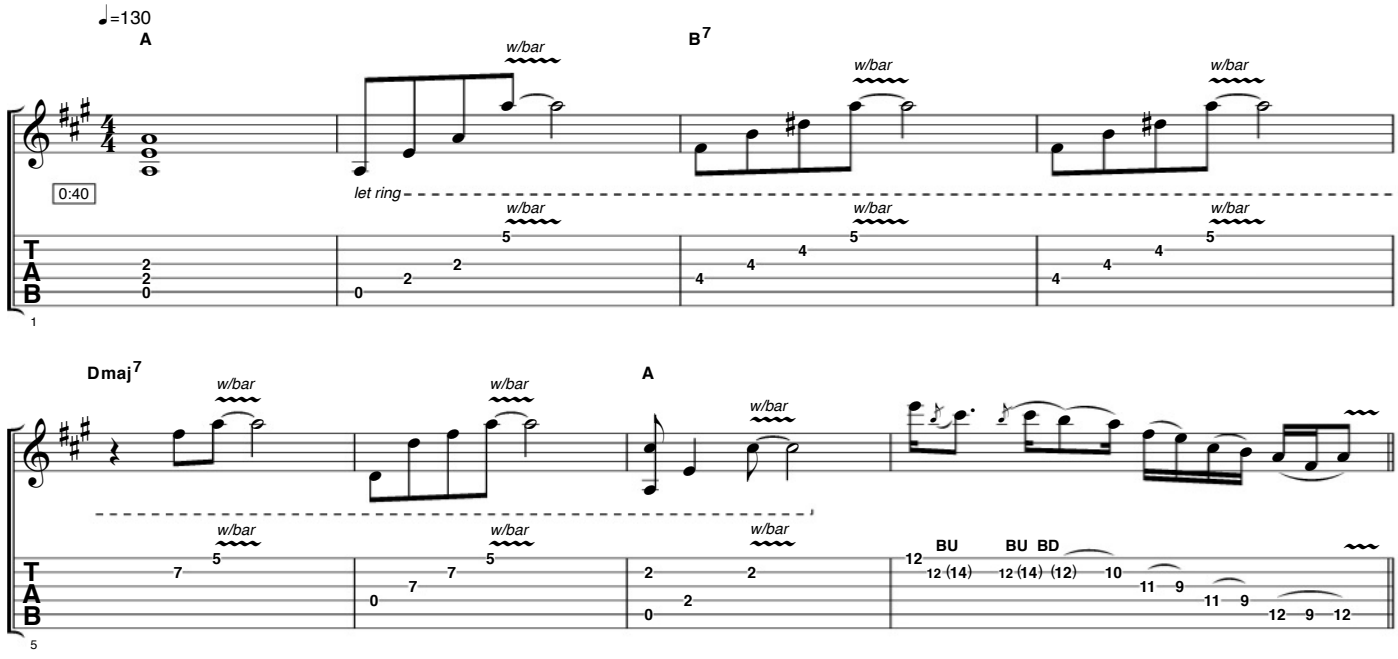
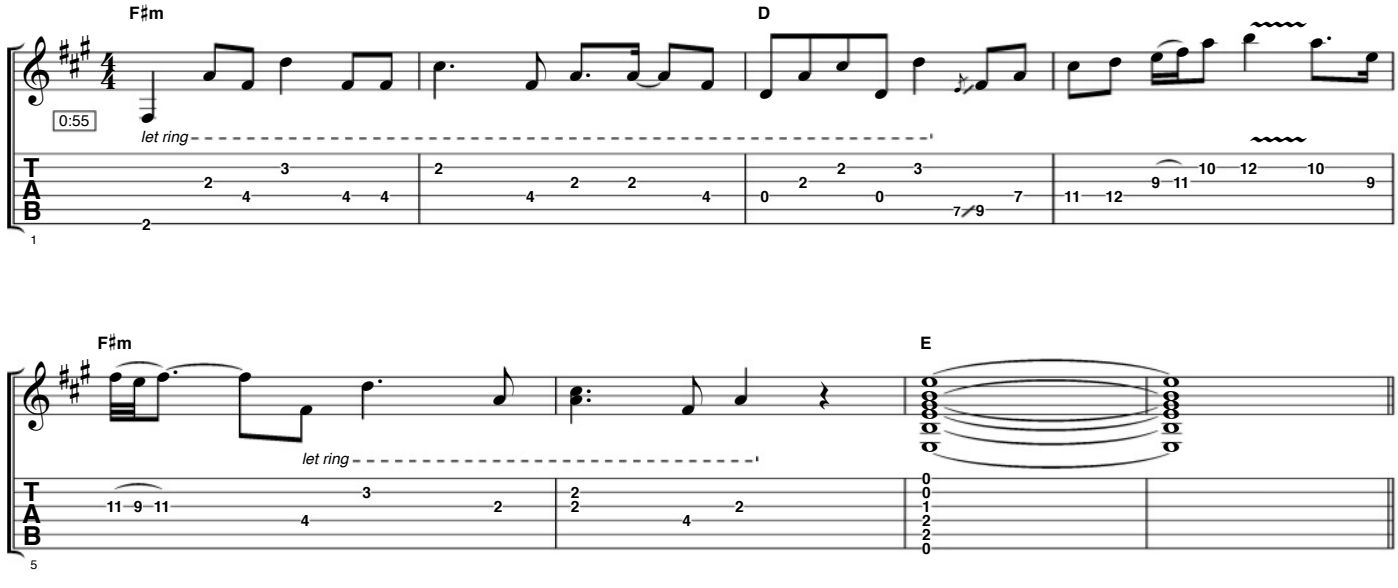
QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC **Verse 1** **bit.ly/tg381audio**



Form the chord shapes fully and use your plectrum (or coin!) to lightly pick the strings and allow the notes to ring as you loosely wobble the tremolo arm for a subtle vibrato. Next, shift up to the 12th fret with your fourth finger and use bends and pull-offs to descend the A major pentatonic scale (A B C♯ E F♯).

QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC **Pre-chorus** **bit.ly/tg381audio**

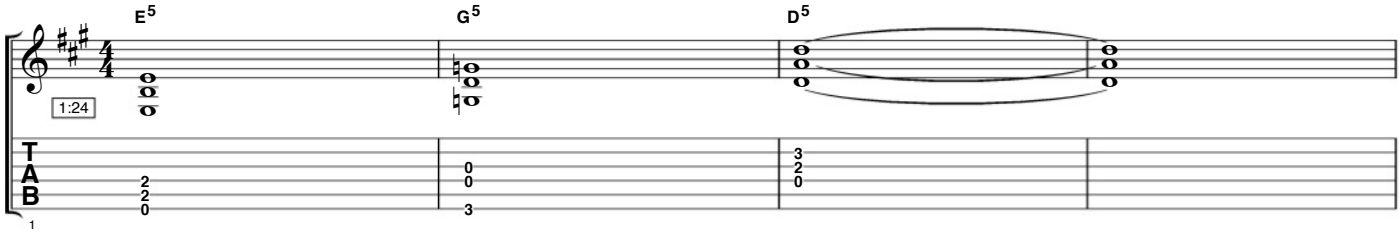


This section occurs only once in the song and starts with F♯ minor, played with your thumb fretting the 2nd-fret root note, and lots of chiming picked arpeggios. If the chords sound too muddy, lower the volume on your guitar until the gain is at the sweet spot.

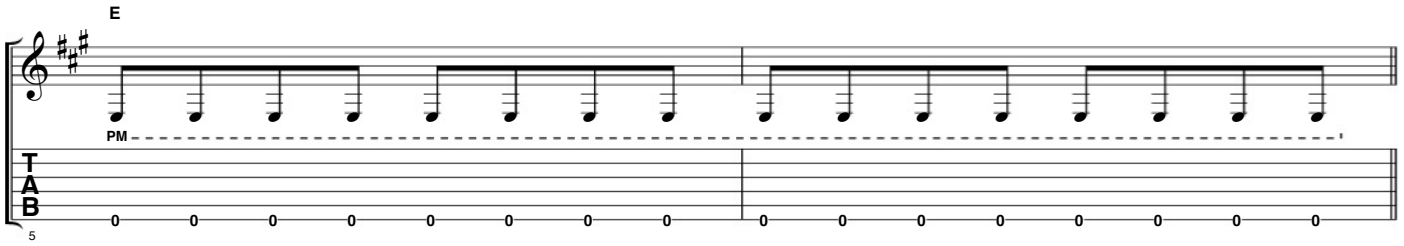
QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC Chorus 1 **bit.ly/tg381audio**

As there's no guitar part here on the record we've added this rock 'n' roll-style riff which Brian plays live. Play the initial powerchord with your first and second (or first and third) fingers and add the higher 6th interval with your fourth finger. For chorus 2, we've left the guitar out, but you can apply this riff to that section, too.

QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC Bridge 1 **bit.ly/tg381audio**

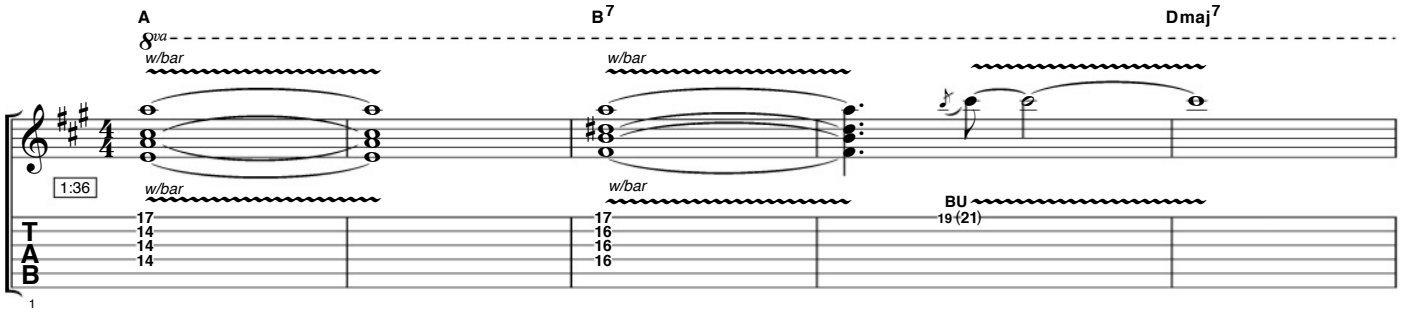


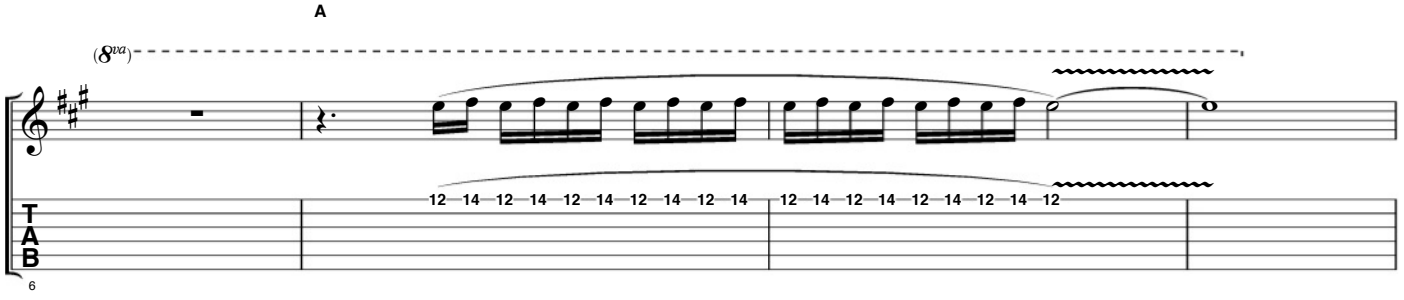
QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC **Bridge 1 (cont'd)** **bit.ly/tg381audio**

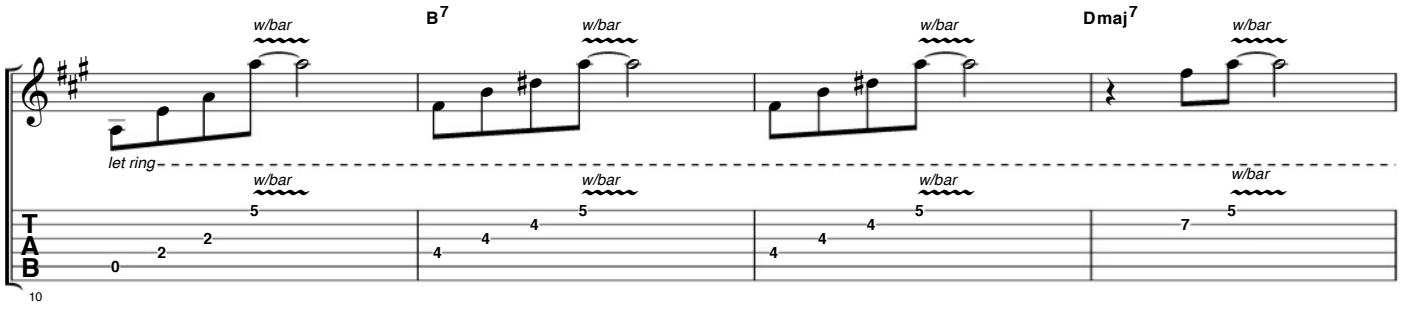


This is the first of three bridge sections which occur after the choruses and also after the first solo. Hit the powerchords loudly and confidently and let them ring for their full duration, then play the open low E note with palm-muted downstrokes.

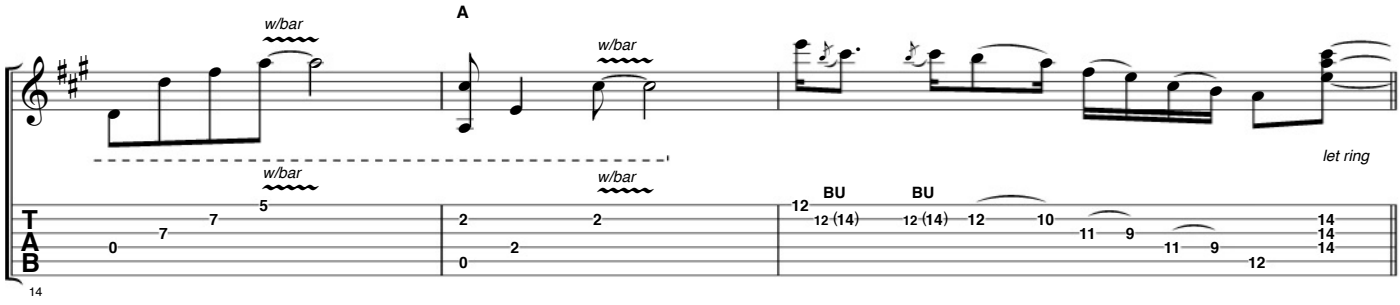
QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC **Verse 2** **bit.ly/tg381audio**





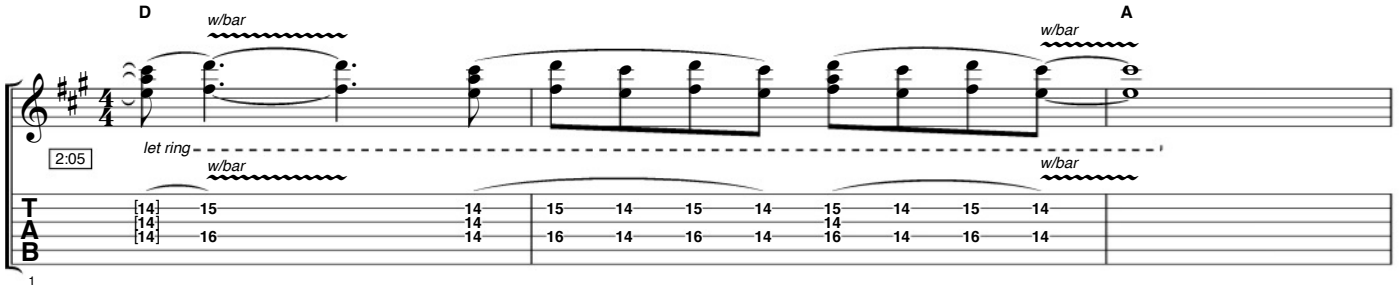


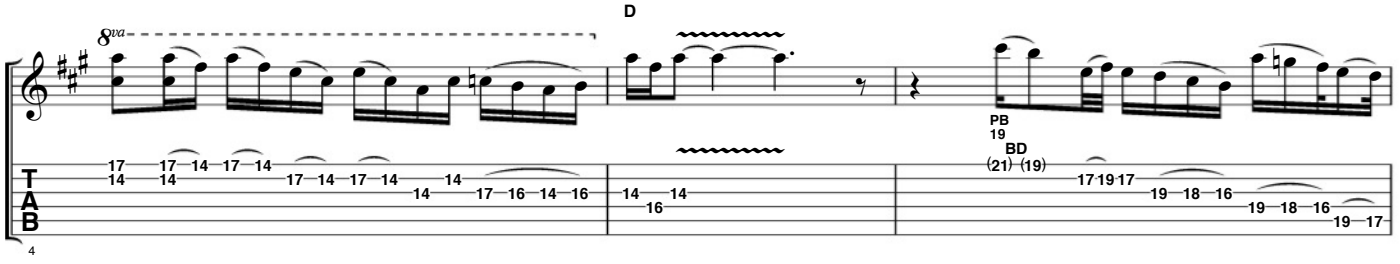
QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC **Verse 2 (cont'd)** **bit.ly/tg381audio**

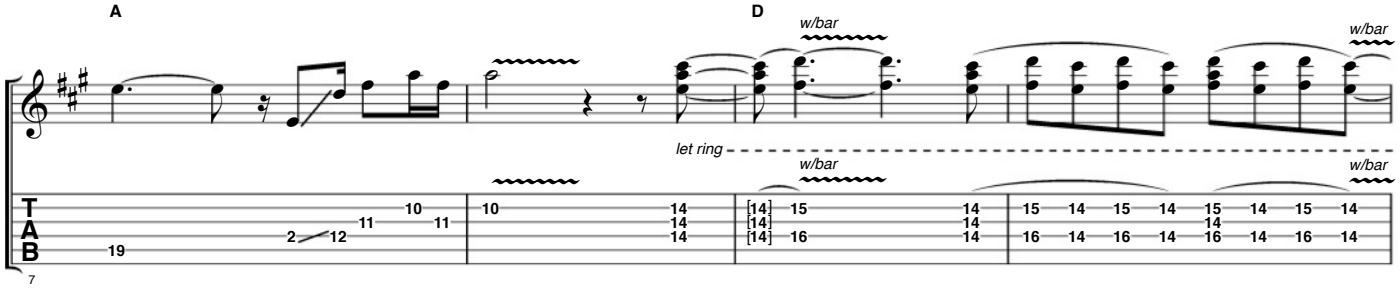


We've added the initial two chords an octave higher here as Brian does live, but everything from the bend onwards is as per the record. Play the trilling 16th notes (bars 7 and 8) with your first and third fingers and focus on keeping the timing and note volume even so as to match the harmony parts on the backing track.

QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC **Solo 1** **bit.ly/tg381audio**

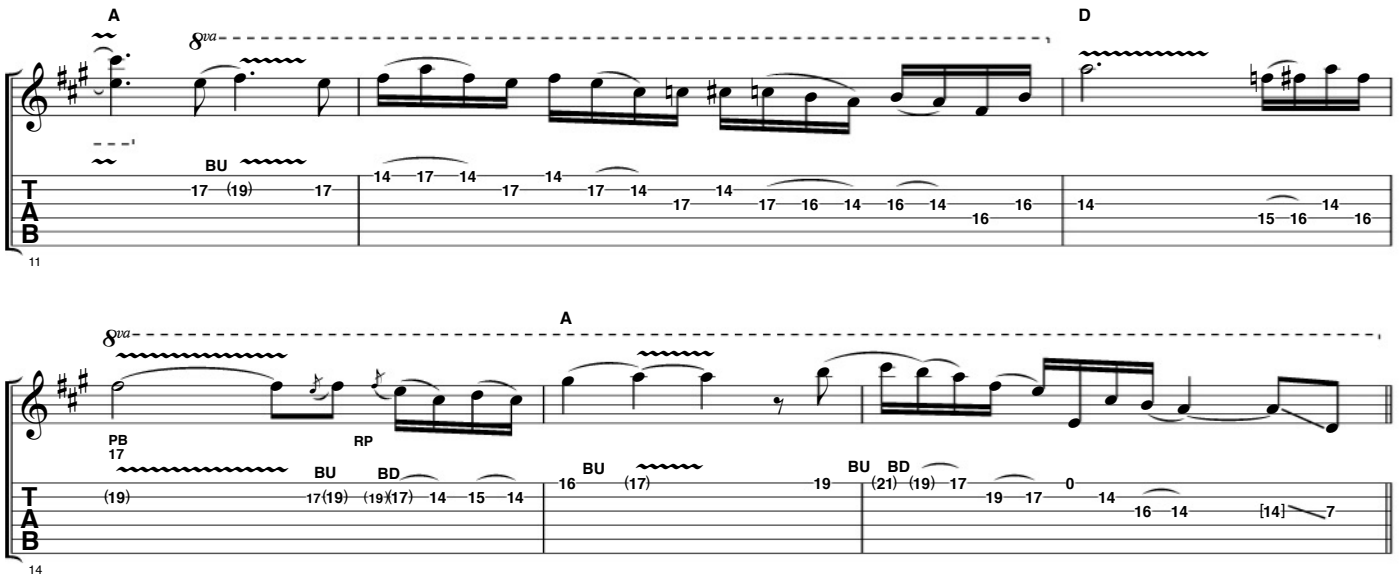






QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC Solo 1 (cont'd)

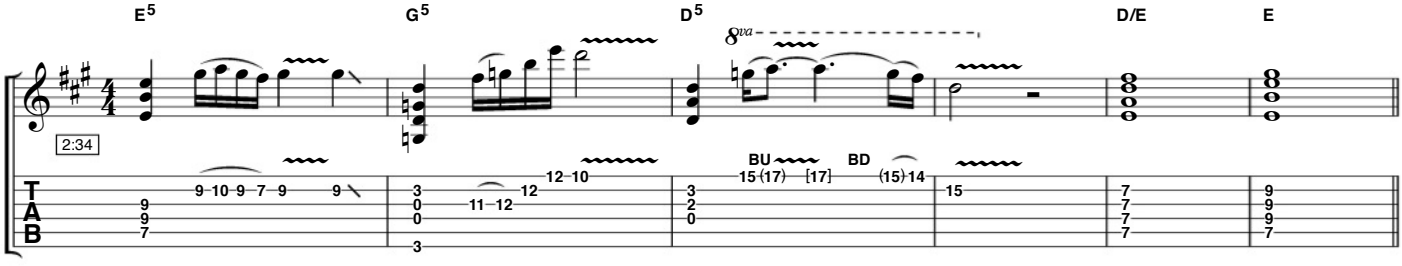
bit.ly/tg381audio



Start with a first-finger, three-string barre at the 14th fret, then hammer on with your second and third fingers for this signature Brian May move. Follow this by strumming and using hammer-ons and pull-offs for the complete riff. Play the following licks with a neck pickup and a cleaner tone. After repeating the opening chord riff, switch to the bridge pickup with a higher gain sound.

QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC Bridge 2

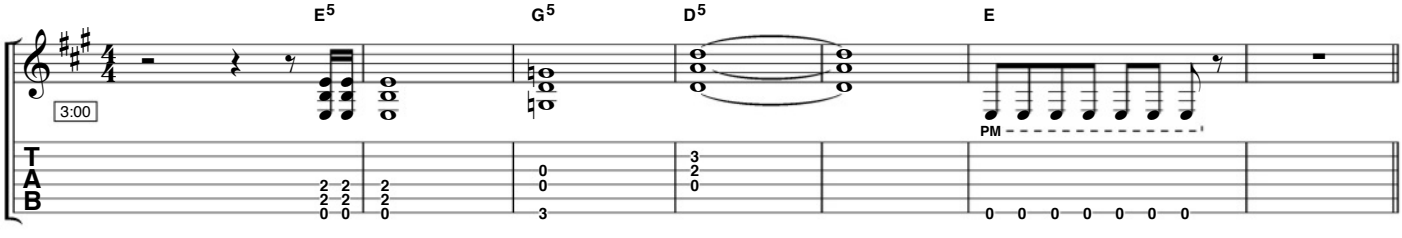
bit.ly/tg381audio



Solo 1 leads you into this bridge, which you should play in a similar way to bridge 1 with big sustained powerchords. Add the overdubbed licks shown in bars 1, 2 and 3 if you like, or just stick to the powerchords.

QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC Bridge 3

bit.ly/tg381audio



This time, the chorus brings us back once again to a bridge that's centred around a D major root chord and begins with the open chords we've seen before. This time, finish with seven palm-muted open E notes.

QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC Solo 2 **bit.ly/tg381audio**

QUEEN A KIND OF MAGIC Solo 2 (cont'd) **bit.ly/tg381audio**

The song finishes with a brilliantly arranged solo over the two chords from the chorus (D and A). On the record, Brian recorded two lead guitars panned left and right, but both parts can be combined for one guitar. Brian switches between D major (D A B C♯ D E F♯) and A major (A B C♯ D E F♯ G♯) as he ascends and descends the scale shapes.

CLASSIC ROCK

HIGH VOLTAGE ROCK'N'ROLL

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OPEN-MIC SONGBOOK

U2
ONE

This anthemic U2 classic can be an easy acoustic strummer or a cool fingerpicked electric riff. The choice is yours!

Irish rock band U2's career is littered with multi-platinum selling albums and legendary concert performances, including Live Aid and live at Red Rocks. *One* was the third single to be released from their hugely popular 1991 album, *Achtung Baby*.

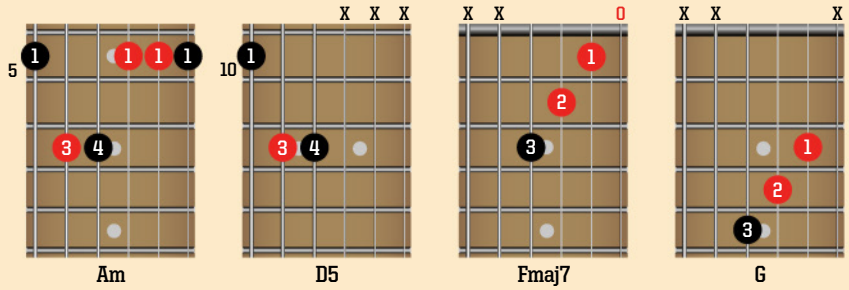
Often with fingerstyle lines you can simply assign your fingers to specific strings, but things aren't quite so straightforward here. Take a look at the tab and you'll see that in bars 1, 2 and 3 alone your first and second fingers move across all of the top five strings. Still, each phrase can be distilled down to a bass note and two higher notes, so use your thumb (p) on the low notes and your first (i) and second (m) fingers for everything else.

Just like U2's original recording, the guitars in our backing track are in standard tuning. Be aware that live versions are mostly played in E♭ tuning (a half-step down) if checking out concert footage on YouTube.

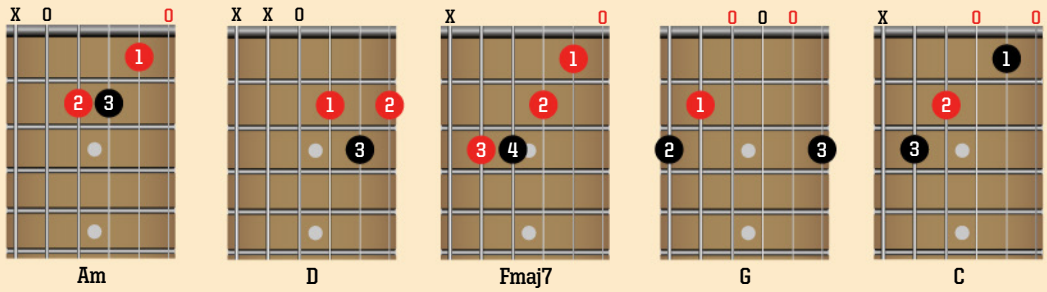
CHORDS

The first four chord shapes shown here are used for the electric part as notated in the tab. Note that The Edge uses his fourth finger to fret the 12th fret when playing D5, but you may prefer to use your third. The next five shapes can be used as a strummed accompaniment for the whole song.

ELECTRIC GUITAR CHORDS



ACOUSTIC GUITAR CHORDS



ONE
Lyrics by Bono and The Edge
Music by U2
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Guitars and backing: Phil Capone Photography: Alamy

SONG SHEET

One

Intro

Am / / / D5 / / / Fmaj7 / / / G / / /

Verse 1

Am D Fmaj7 G
Is it getting better, or do you feel the same?
Am D
Will it make it easier on you
Fmaj7 G
Now you got someone to blame?

Chorus 1

C Am Fmaj7
You say one love, one life
C
When it's one need in the night
Am Fmaj7
One love, we get to share it
C
Leaves you baby if you don't care for it

Repeat intro

Verse 2

Am D Fmaj7
Did I disappoint you
G
Or leave a bad taste in your mouth?
Am D Fmaj7
You act like you never had love
G
And you want me to go without

Chorus 2

C Am Fmaj7
Well, it's too late tonight
C
To drag the past out into the light
Am
We're one, but we're not the same
Fmaj7 C
We get to carry eachother, carry eachother... One

Repeat intro

Verse 3

Am D Fmaj7
Have you come here for forgiveness?
G
Have you come to raise the dead?
Am D
Have you come here to play Jesus
Fmaj7 G
To the lepers in your head?

Chorus 3

C Am Fmaj7
Did I ask too much, more than a lot?
C
You gave me nothing, now it's all I got
Am
We're one, but we're not the same
Fmaj7 C
Well, we hurt each other, then we do it again

Bridge

Am
You say love is a temple, love a higher law
C Am
Love is a temple, love the higher law
C G
You ask me to enter, but then you make me crawl
Fmaj7
And I can't be holding on to what you got
C
When all you got is hurt

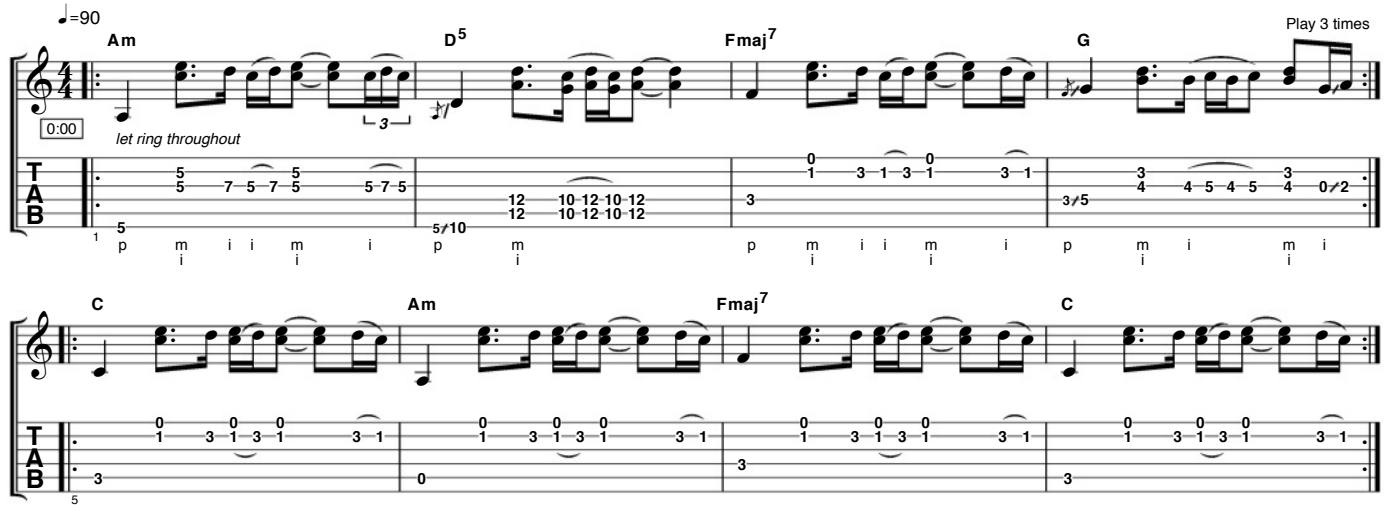
Chorus 4

Am Fmaj7
One love, one blood
C
One life, you got to do what you should
Am Fmaj7 C
One life with each other, sisters, brothers
Am
One life, but we're not the same
Fmaj7 C
We get to carry each other, carry each other
Am Fmaj7 C
One, one

Outro

C / / / Am / / / Fmaj7 / / / C / / / x4

U2 ONE **Intro** bit.ly/tg381audio



Hold down the full chord shapes and only pick out the notes indicated in the tab for a ringing sound. The Edge plays this part with small variations throughout, usually on the single-note flourishes at the end of each bar, so check out live performances on YouTube if you want to mix it up.

CECIL ALEXANDER

Cecil Alexander is a guitarist, composer, and arranger from Muskegon, MI. He has a B.M. in Jazz Composition from Berklee and has since gone on to become Assistant Professor of Guitar there. With a string of awards from various jazz guitar competitions and a recent signing with Heartcore Records, Cecil has truly cemented himself as a world-class musician.

SCOOBY BLUES

We've got a treat for you today. Some tasty blues Scooby Snacks for you to sink your teeth into!

Many of you will be familiar with the 12-bar blues, but you may not know that it's also one of the most common progressions in jazz music, too. With a few stylistic tweaks, Cecil Alexander will teach you how to turn this simple blues format into something even the snootiest jazz cats will be clicking their fingers to.

This etude incorporates bebop scales, arpeggios, and, of course, our faithful blues scale. You'll also pick up a few of Cecil's go-to improvisational ideas along the way.

There's a lot to learn here, and it's fairly advanced stuff, so we've divided the track into 12-bar chunks to make it a little more digestible. As with all challenging material, take it slowly and perhaps start by choosing a handful of your favourite licks from the track and focusing on those before piecing it all together.

Right, grab your guitar, warm up those fingers, and let's get started!

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1 SCOOBY BLUES: BUILDING BLUES MOTIFS

bit.ly/tg381audio

In the first couple of bars, Cecil starts by building some basic blues motifs using the B♭ blues and major pentatonic scales. Motifs are mini melodies that you can craft a solo around, helping to create a theme that you can build upon. Check out Cecil's first motifs and notice that he comes back to them later on.

2 SCOOBY BLUES: USING DOUBLESTOPS

bit.ly/tg381audio

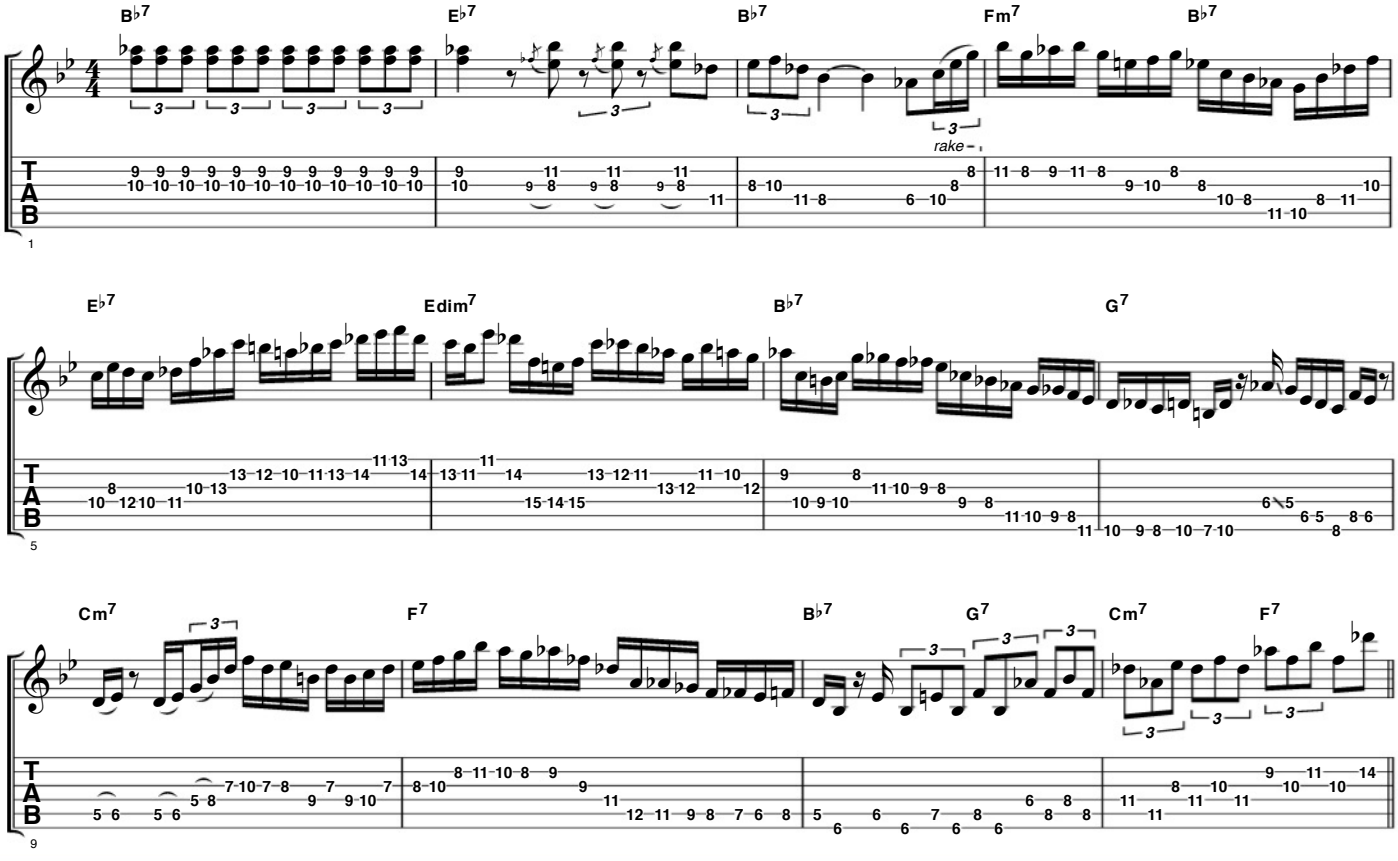
2 SCOOBY BLUES: USING DOUBLESTOPS (cont'd)

bit.ly/tg381audio

Doublestops (two notes played together) are a handy way of harmonising the most effective notes in a melody and thickening the texture. You'll hear three doublestop lines that have been altered slightly to outline the I (B♭7), IV (E♭7), and ♭V (Edim7) chords heard in the blues progression.

3 SCOOBY BLUES: CREATING A II-V CHANGE TO THE IV CHORD

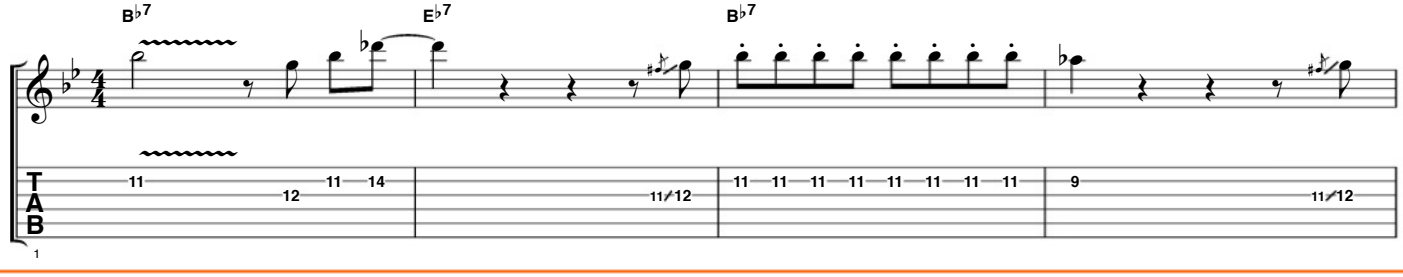
bit.ly/tg381audio



A II-V means using chords built on the second and fifth scale notes in the key – and it's a core jazz concept. *Scooby Blues* is in B♭ (B♭ C D E♭ F G A) so a II-V progression would use C and F chords one after the other. You can also throw in a II-V even if they're not really there! In bar 4, Cecil creates a mini II-V progression to land on the E♭7 in bar 5. So, treating E♭ as your root F and B♭ are the II and V respectively.

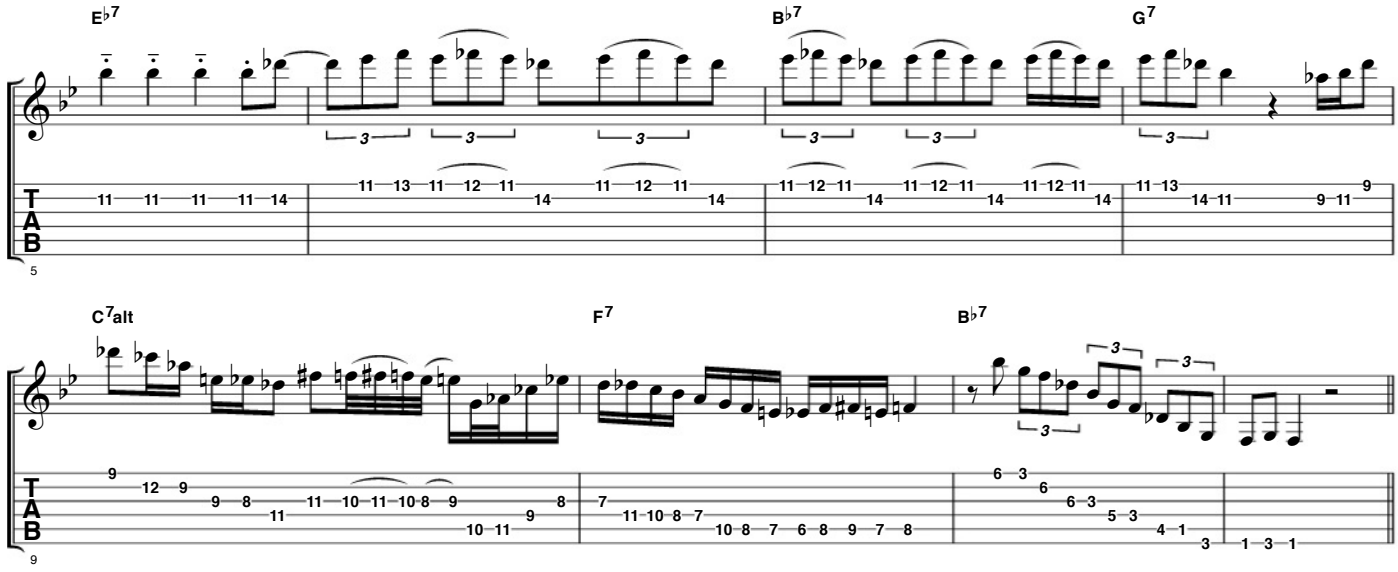
4 SCOOBY BLUES: SWITCHING KEY CENTERS ON THE DESCENT

bit.ly/tg381audio



4 SCOOBY BLUES: SWITCHING KEY CENTERS ON THE DESCENT (cont'd)

bit.ly/tg381audio



Cecil's final flourish is on the descent back to the last II-V (C7-F7 – the second and fifth steps in the track's key of B♭). This lick is built over E major and falls by a half step to the V chord (F7).

5 SCOOBY BLUES: FINAL VERSE

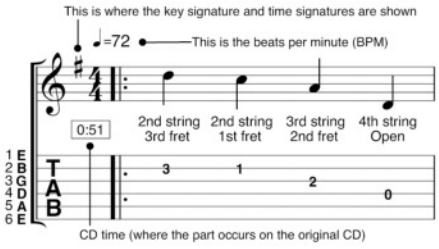
bit.ly/tg381audio

This is essentially a repeat of the opening 12 bars of the track as Cecil returns to the B♭ blues/major pentatonic lick he began with, so the same rules apply. Watch out for some slight phrasing variations in Cecil's performance.

TAB GUIDE

Get more from TG by understanding our easy-to-follow musical terms and signs

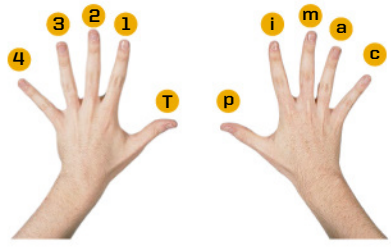
What is tab?



Tab is short for tablature, a notational system used to give detailed information as to where notes should be played on the fretboard. Tab appears underneath conventional music notation as six horizontal lines that represent the strings of the guitar, from the sixth (thick) string at the bottom to the first (thin) string at the top. On these lines, numbers represent which frets you place your fingers. For example, an A note on the 2nd fret, third string, will be shown as a number '2' on the third line down on the tab. Unfretted strings are shown with a '0'. The key and time signatures are shown in the notation. TG also includes a timestamp to tell you where in the original track you'll find each example and tempo expressed in beats per minute.

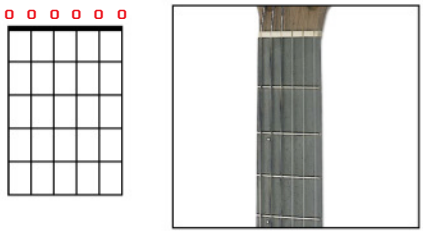
FRET BOXES: CHORDS, SCALES AND CAPO NOTATION

HAND LABELLING



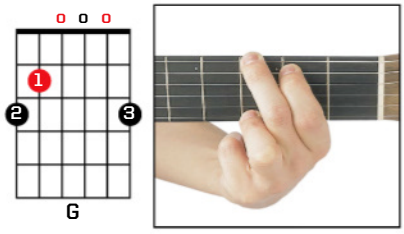
Here are the abbreviations used for each finger. Fretting hand: **1, 2, 3, 4, (T)** Picking hand: **p (thumb), i (index), m (middle), a (annular), c (little finger)**

NUT AND FRETBOARD



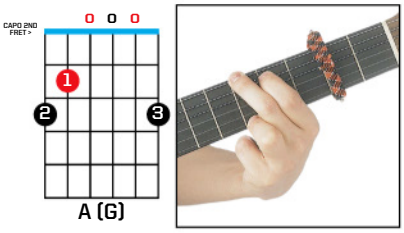
This fretbox diagram represents the guitar's fretboard exactly, as seen in the photo. This design is used for ease of visualising a fretboard scale or chord quickly.

CHORD EXAMPLE



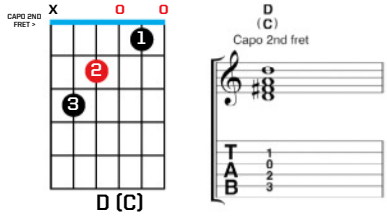
This diagram represents a G chord. The 'o's are open strings, and a circled number is a fretting hand finger. A black 'o' or circled number is the root note (here, G).

CAPO EXAMPLE



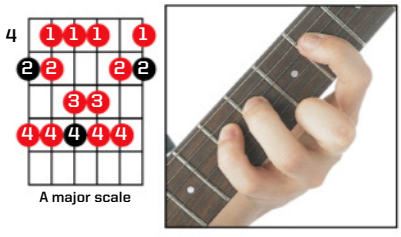
The blue line in the diagram represents a capo – for this A chord, place it at the 2nd fret. Capos change the fret number ordering. Here, the original 5th fret now becomes the 3rd fret, 7th fret now 5th fret, etc.

CAPO NOTATION



Here the chord looks like a C in the tab, but the capo on the 2nd fret raises the pitch to make it a D. The 2nd fret capo'd notes are shown with a '0' in the tab as if they were open strings.

SCALE EXAMPLE



The fret box diagram illustrates the fret hand fingering for the A major scale using black dots for root notes and red dots for other scale tones. The photo shows part of the scale being played on the fourth string with the first, third and fourth fingers.

GUITAR TECHNIQUES: PICKING

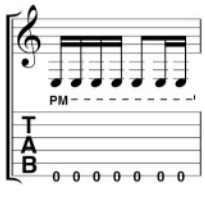
DOWN AND UP-PICKING

The symbols under the tab tell you the first note is to be down-picked and the second note is to be up-picked.

TREMOLO PICKING

Each of the four notes are to be alternate-picked (down and up-picked) very rapidly and continuously.

PALM MUTING



Palm-mute by resting the edge of your picking hand palm on the strings near the bridge saddles.

PICK RAKE

Drag the pick across the strings shown with a single sweep. This is often used to augment a rake's last note.

APPREGGIATED CHORD

Play the notes of the chord by strumming across the relevant strings in the direction of the arrow head.

FRETTING HAND

HAMMER-ON & PULL-OFF

Pick the first note then hammer down on the string for the second note. Pick the third note and pull-off for the fourth note.

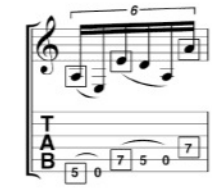
NOTE TRILLS

After picking the first note, rapidly alternate between the two notes shown in brackets using hammer-ons and pull-offs.

SLIDES (GLISSANDO)

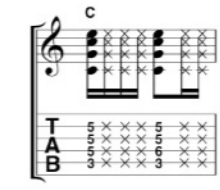
Pick the first note and then slide to the next. For the last two notes pick the first, slide to the next and then re-pick it (RP).

FRET-HAND TAPPING



Sound the notes marked with a square by hammering-on/tapping with your fret hand fingers, instead of picking.

FRET-HAND MUTING



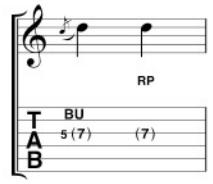
X markings represent notes and strings that are muted by your fret hand when struck by your picking hand.

BENDING AND VIBRATO

BEND AND RELEASE

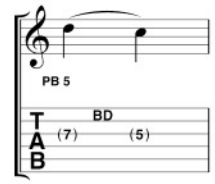
Fret the first note (here, the 5th fret) and bend up to the pitch of the bracketed note, before releasing again.

RE-PICKED BEND



Bend up to the pitch shown in the brackets, then re-pick the note while holding the bent note at the pitch shown.

PRE-BEND

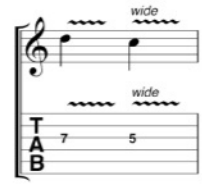


Silently bend the string up from the 5th fret (PB5) to the pitch of the 7th fret note, pick it and release to the 5th fret note.

QUARTER-TONE BEND

Pick the note then bend up a quarter-tone (a very small amount). This is sometimes referred to as a 'blues curl'.

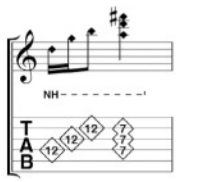
VIBRATO



Your fretting hand vibrates the string by small bend-ups and releases. Exaggerate this effect to create a 'wide' vibrato.

HARMONICS

NATURAL HARMONICS

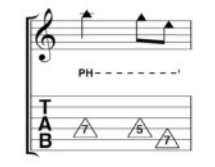


Pick the note while lightly touching the string directly over the fret indicated. A chiming harmonic results.

ARTIFICIAL HARMONICS

Fret the note as shown, then lightly place your index finger directly over 'x' fret (AH'x') and pick (with a pick, p or a).

PINCHED HARMONICS

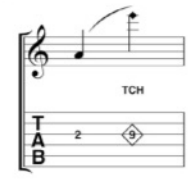


After fretting the note in the triangle, dig into the string with the side of your thumb as you sound it with the pick.

TAPPED HARMONICS

Place your finger on the note as shown, but sound it with a quick pick hand tap at the fret shown (TH17) for a harmonic.

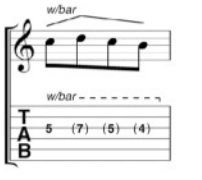
TOUCHED HARMONICS



A previously sounded note is touched above the fret marked TCH (eg, TCH 9) for it to sound a harmonic.

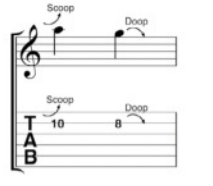
VIBRATO BAR / WHAMMY BAR

WHAMMY BAR BENDS



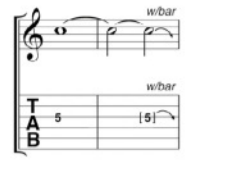
The note is picked as shown, then the vibrato bar is raised and lowered to the pitches shown in brackets.

SCOOP AND DOOP



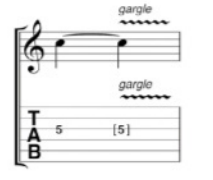
Scoop: depress the bar just before striking the note and release. Doop: lower the bar slightly after picking note.

SUSTAINED NOTE AND DIVEBOMB



A Note is sustained then the vibrato bar is depressed to slack. The square bracket indicates a further articulation.

GARGLE



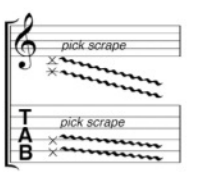
Sound the note and 'flick' the vibrato bar with your picking hand so it 'quivers'. This results in a 'gargling' sound!

WHAMMY BAR VIBRATO

Gently rock the whammy bar to repeatedly bend the pitch up and down. This sounds similar to fret hand vibrato.

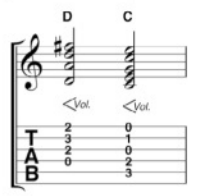
OTHERS

PICK SCRAPE



The edge of the pick is dragged either down or up along the lower strings to produce a scraped sound.

VIOLINING

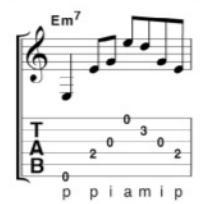


Turn the volume control down, sound the note(s) and then turn the volume up for a smooth fade in.

FINGER NUMBERING

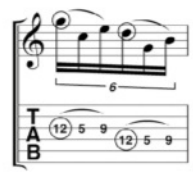
The numbers in the traditional notation refer to the fingers required to play each note.

PIMA DIRECTIONS



Any kind of fingerpicking requirements are shown at the bottom of the tab notation.

PICK HAND TAPPING



Tap (hammer-on) with a finger of your picking hand onto the fret marked with a circle. Usually with 'i' or 'm'.

THE GAS STATION

REAL WORLD REVIEWS OF THE BEST NEW GEAR

Welcome to the GAS (Gear Acquisition Syndrome*) Station! Every issue, TG scours the market for the hottest new gear and brings you transparent reviews that you can trust. From the smallest of accessories that make your life easier, to big investments, such as brand new guitars, amps and effects pedals – if it's worth your attention, you'll find it here!

HOW WE TEST

CURATION
Our product selection is driven by our love of gear. We select the most exciting products on the market every month to bring you opinions you can trust.

FACE-VALUE REVIEWS
We're not gear snobs here at *Total Guitar*. We judge it on whether it looks good, sounds good and plays well – not by the name on the headstock.

***WHAT IS GAS?**
Gear Acquisition Syndrome is the guitar-player's never-ending urge to acquire new gear, irrespective of whether they actually need it. Don't pretend you don't have it – we all do!

NO SNAKE OIL
You won't find us getting hung up on hokey mythology or nonsense marketing speak: we aim to bring you bullsh*t-free opinions on the gear you're interested in.

WE CAN'T BE BOUGHT
TG review scores are a true reflection of our experts' opinion on the product they've been testing. You'll never find a rating in our mag that has been bought and paid for.

REAL WORLD REVIEWS
We test every product under the conditions that they were designed for. For example, if an amp is designed to be played loud, rest assured that we'll have tested it at rehearsal/gig volumes!

BEST BUY AWARD
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PLATINUM AWARD
Reserved for the very best of the best, TG's Platinum Awards are given to class-leading, gamechanging products that score a maximum 5 stars in every category.

SUPERB, A BEST BUY	EXCELLENT	ABOVE AVERAGE KIT	SOME ISSUES	POOR

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Five new products you need to check out

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Snappy colours with classic rock tone – let's introduce the Modern Lite!

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One of a duo of new stripped-down, innovative and staged-aimed electros

90 SHERGOLD PROVOCATEUR STANDARD SP12
This charming and affordable electric is sure to provoke a positive reaction

92 STERLING BY MUSIC MAN ST. VINCENT GOLDIE
A streamlined take on one of the most exciting guitar designs in recent memory

94 MXR M309 JOSHUA AMBIENT ECHO
Ambient soundscapes and practical delays in one box

2

1

4

3

5

START ME UP!

Five awesome new products to get your gear engine revving this month...

VOX AMPLUG 3

1 There's no reason not to be able to practise anywhere in 2024. So says Korg, with its amPlug 3 headphone practice amps. Now in its third iteration, the amPlug goes straight into your guitar's jack socket, while you connect your headphones to its output. amPlug 3 comes in seven flavours: AC30, UK Drive, US Silver, Boutique, High Gain, Bass and modern Bass, and each features two channels, on-board effects and rhythm patterns.

£47

www.voxamps.co.uk

IBANEZ TS808 45TH ANNIVERSARY

2 You'd recognise the Ibanez Tube Screamer TS808 and that distinctive green paint job... hang on. Yep, Ibanez is celebrating 45 years of its most famous overdrive pedal this year, and has reissued it. The big news is that – apart from the limited edition Sapphire Blue finish – the 45th anniversary TS808 is faithful to the original, including the coveted JRC4558D chip. If you're a TS fan, this one will be high on your list for 2024.

£209

www.ibanez.com

FENDER SWITCHBOARD EFFECTS OPERATOR

3 Fender has unveiled the Switchboard Effects Operator – a switching unit that lets you hook all your pedals into five true bypass loops, which means you can then bring in entire patch combinations with the kick of a switch. There are 400 preset memories, with an additional 100 'favourites', plus you can use the Switchboard to change your amp's channel selection. Additional sockets include an expression pedal input, as well as a five-pin DIN output for MIDI-based pedals.

£419

www.fender.com

SNARK ST-8 TITANIUM

4 Everyone's favourite clip-on tuner returns, and this time it's Titanium. But the Snark ST-8 isn't just about a facelift. You see, the Snark boffins have encased the mic/display part of the Snark in a 'sound shield'. This spiky rubber bumper aims to block-out unwanted external frequencies, meaning that you'll tune quicker, and more accurately. It's fully chromatic, rechargeable and lasts for ages from one charge.

£32.99

www.snarktuners.com

MOOER X2 SERIES

5 Mooer is looking to smack your pitch up (or down) with its new X2 series Tender Octaver and Harmony pedals. The Tender Octaver is equipped with octave-up and octave-down circuits, as well as your guitar's dry signal you can achieve a three-octave range from one note. What's more, each shifted signal has its own tone control. The Harmony, meanwhile, can send individual harmonies to each of its two outputs, and both pedals have built-in memories for saving and recalling patches.

£TBC

www.mooeraudio.com

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN LITE

£1,499

Snappy colours with classic rock tone – let's introduce the Modern Lite!

The latest in a long line of cut-price Les Pauls, the Modern Lite, which for 2024 replaces the Les Paul Tribute and Les Paul Special Tribute models in the Gibson USA line-up, certainly lives up to at least 50 per cent of its name: at just 6.67lb it's the lightest solidbody LP we've ever encountered! But Modern? Offered in five far-from-vintage solid colours it's hardly vintage-style, but unlike the other guitars in the Modern range it keeps things old-school when it comes to wiring and sounds, and indeed its build.

Also unlike the full-fat Les Paul, the new Lite is all mahogany but its body depth drops to an overall 45mm, approximately 33mm at the edge, although thanks to the carved top and its slight rib-cage contour on the back, it actually seems thinner, more SG-like. It's certainly a very different guitar in the feel department compared to our Gibson Les Paul Classic reference with its full 62mm body depth (and with it, despite the nine-hole weight relief, a weight of 9lb!).

> "LIGHT ON THE SHOULDER BUT FAR FROM LACKING IN HEFT"

You can just about see through the light satin finish that it's a two-piece body used here; the neck is one-piece with a standard heel shape, unlike the contoured heel of the upper-market Modern Les Pauls.

There's no truck with edge binding on the body or neck, and we get simple Junior/Special-style dot inlays on the rosewood fingerboard that again, unlike the more expensive Moderns, has a standard – not compound – 12" radius. The Lite does retain the thinner SlimTaper neck profile, though, which dimensionally is pretty similar to the upper market models although, obviously, the thin satin finish gives a more textural feel. You might expect a bigger gauge of fretwire on a 'modern' guitar like this, but it's a pretty standard-for-Gibson medium wire, which isn't particularly high, adding a more vintage feel if we're honest. Our review sample's frets could also do with a bit more of a polish, but set-up wise, aside from slightly sharp fingerboard edges, we have no complaints.

The hardware is the same as you'll find on the more expensive Modern Les Pauls – the wider travel 'Nashville' tune-o-matic bridge and lightweight aluminium stop tailpiece. However, the tuners here are 'mini' Grover Rotomatics, which feel smooth and positive. On paper, the Modern Lite's potential as a modding platform looks good, too, but the thin body depth means fitting things like pull-switch pots into the rear cavity might not be possible. That said, you'd have no problem fitting any after-market humbuckers.

Photography Phil Barker

1 CONSTRUCTION STYLE

To achieve the start-up price-point, one feature the Modern Lite uses is a thin-depth, all-mahogany body with no maple cap, although the top itself does have the usual Les Paul-style carve.

2 PICKUPS & WIRING

It's in the Modern strand of the Gibson USA line-up, but there are no tricks as far as the wiring and circuit are concerned, using standard Gibson-logo'd CTS 500k pots and very small blue .022F tone capacitors.

3 FINISH STYLE & COLOURS

This is the first time, apparently, that Gibson has used a colour-matched headstock on a USA production Les Paul model. The actual finish is a very thin 'open pore' satin nitro which no doubt will 'relic' quickly in use. There are five colours but all use the same black pickups, rings and pickguard.

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Mahogany with carved top

NECK: Mahogany, SlimTaper profile, glued-in

SCALE: 624mm (24.6")

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood/12" radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

PICKUPS: Uncovered Gibson 490R (neck) and 498T (bridge) humbuckers

CONTROLS: Volume and tone for each pickup, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch

HARDWARE: Nashville tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stud tailpiece, Grover Mini Rotomatic tuners with kidney buttons

FINISH: Cardinal Red (as reviewed), TV Wheat, Gold Mist, Inverness Green, Rose Gold – satin nitro-cellulose with colour matched headstocks

CONTACT: Gibson, gibson.com

Back to the future...

Gibson's other Modern models boast drastically different features

Some of Gibson's more innovative designs, not least their 'robot' tuners, haven't always engaged with users, but a feature of other Modern models are some pretty tricky electronics, as opposed to the Modern Lite's far-from-modern standard controls.

While the vintage brigade scoff at such trickery, the four-control PCB-mounted electrics featured on other Moderns like the Les Paul Classic all have CTS pull switches that engage a so-called 'coil tap' for each pickup (actually a small capacitor which filters one coil of the humbucker); a phase switch for your Greeny moments and a direct-to-output function for the bridge pickup. Also, the four-conductor pickups use the Quick Connect plugs which simply push-fit onto the circuit board, making pickup swaps a solder-free task. With the push-switches down, the guitar functions as a standard LP.

So, yes, there is a whiff of 'cut-price' about this guitar – not least if you play it side-by-side with the rather superbly detailed Epiphone Greeny we recently took a look at – but your audience is going to clock the proper name on the headstock and be treated to some raw rock sounds: something the Lite excels at. The open-coiled humbuckers here, the long-running 490R 'Modern Classic' and 498T 'Hot Alnico' at bridge, really deliver. There's a quite vintage-vibe to the neck humbucker with its Alnico 2 magnet and 8k ohms DCR while the bridge pickup swaps to Alnico 5, a higher resistance reading of 14.2k, indicating a thinner coil wire, with plenty of bite and power on tap. Overall it comes across a little more SG-like than classic LP and that might well be its appeal: a punky-edged rock 'n' roll machine that's light on your shoulder but far from lacking in heft.

Obviously, there are plenty of classic Les Paul-alikes on the market at this price (and less), and the rudimentary finishing won't be for everyone. And yes, while there's good colour choice, the all-black plastic parts used on all the hues does reinforce its start-up status. But for many, owning the 'real thing' made in the USA is one of *those* aspirations, isn't it?

An obvious shoe-in for younger players, the Modern Lite is also a perfect spare or second guitar for the more experienced gigging musician and works very well open-tuned for slide with great potential for heavier string gauges and dropped tunings. It's a very unpretentious guitar, and although it might lack a little sophistication – and 'modernism' – the recipe remains timeless. Find a nice one of these and you'll have a friend and gigging partner for as long as you want.

Dave Burrluck

SUMMARY	
FEATURES	✪✪✪✪✪
SOUND QUALITY	✪✪✪✪✪
VALUE FOR MONEY	✪✪✪✪✪
BUILD QUALITY	✪✪✪✪✪
USABILITY	✪✪✪✪✪
OVERALL RATING	✪✪✪✪✪

ALSO TRY...

GORDON SMITH GS 60 £999

The Brit-brand is celebrating its 50th Anniversary this year, and their GS model – which has similar specs to the Modern Lite – goes back to the early days and is also available as a singe-cut.

PJD CAREY STANDARD £1,299

Okay, it's a bolt-on, but PJD's Carey is a modern single-cut using a lightweight obeche body with a maple neck and fingerboard. The pickups are made in-house, plus they now use a Plek machine to dial in the playability.

EPIPHONE GREENY LES PAUL £1,499

It might be made in China with the 'wrong' name on the headstock, but for the same money as the Modern Lite, this is a full-fat Les Paul with Gibson USA Greenybuckers and a hard case to boot.

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FENDER HIGHWAY SERIES DREADNOUGHT £949

One of a duo of new stripped-down, innovative and staged-aimed electros

Some see Fender as a fuddy-duddy heritage company simply churning out replicas from their past. And while they certainly do that, we've seen plenty of innovation in recent years, not least with their Acoustasonic range and the Tone Master digital amps.

This new Mexican-made Highway Series duo continue the innovation pioneered by the Acoustasonic designs, but instead of using Fender electric guitar outlines they resort to more conventional non-cutaway acoustic shapes: the larger dreadnought we have here and a smaller parlor model. Both use a large block of mahogany for the back and sides which is machined out to create the 'chambered' acoustic space, and you can buy both with either a mahogany or spruce top, and the mahogany necks bolt to the body. While the Acoustasonics use a complex two- or three-pickup set up, the Highways are way more straightforward with just that unique curved Fishman Fluence Core pickup at the top of the sound hole and top-mounted volume and contour controls. The simpler system is powered by a 9-volt block battery accessed in a separate cavity on the back.

While it looks mostly like a regular acoustic, the Highway feels rather different. Firstly, the body depth is virtually halved and feels a bit more electric-like, which is also the impression you get from the full 25.5-inch scale neck. Comparing our review model directly with an Acoustasonic Jazzmaster, the necks are *very* similar, with the same 12-inch fingerboard radius and 'narrow tall' frets – very electric-like.

We certainly don't get the acoustic power or volume that you'd get with a similarly priced, traditionally-built dreadnought, but there's certainly enough for an unplugged jam with your mates or solo practice. Plugged-in, it's a very simple drive, and the sounds here remind us more of Fishman's Rare Earth sound-hole pickup than the crisper pristine voices of the Acoustasonic. In lower positions there's acoustic-like detail that seems fuller and more musical than many under-saddle systems. As you move up the neck it sounds a little more electric-like in a very bluesy, jazzy fashion – great for lead lines and solos, and works very well in open tuning with a bottleneck. To be fair, the contour control is relatively subtle in terms of its frequency shift, but this system not only sounds superb through a dedicated acoustic amp but we had loads of fun with our pedalboard and electric amp, not least due to the fact that the slimmer depth body is very feedback resistant.

So, while not a cheap date, it's a very cleanly made, stage-aimed electro that's far from cumbersome, looks like the real thing and sounds it too, but with plenty of potential for the player that wants to break the rules.

Dave Burrluck

SUMMARY	
FEATURES	★★★★★
SOUND QUALITY	★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
PLAYABILITY	★★★★★
OVERALL RATING	★★★★½

1 BODY
Unlike a conventional electro-acoustic, the back and sides here are machined from a solid block of mahogany with a thinline depth of 2.25-inches. Both Sitka spruce or mahogany tops are offered on both Highway shapes.

2 PICKUP
The unique curved Fluence Core pickup is designed by Fishman, who also worked with Fender on the innovative Acoustasonic range. But the Highway doesn't use any DSP, it's a more simple, single source pickup system.

3 CONTROLS
Again, more simple than the Acoustasonic, the Highway uses just a volume and a contour control: at one end of the control we have a full frequency voice, aimed at fingerpickers, and at the other we get reduced bass and pushed mids aimed at players working with a band.

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Chambered mahogany back and sides; mahogany top
NECK: Mahogany, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood
FRETS: 20, medium fine
PICKUPS: Fishman Fluence
CONTROLS: Volume and contour
HARDWARE: Vintage-style Fender six-in-a-line tuners
LEFT-HANDED: No
FINISH: Natural
CASE: No, gigbag only
CONTACT: Fender, www.fender.com

Guitar BEST BUY AWARD

Photography Olly Curtis

VOLUME
TONE

SHERGOLD PROVOCATEUR STANDARD SP12 £409

This charming and affordable electric is sure to provoke a positive reaction

Never heard of Shergold? Well, don't worry, we'll let you off. While this slightly obscure UK brand was once popular in the late '70s and early '80s, it never quite became a household name. Now, that's not to say these British guitars didn't have their fair share of famous users, with the likes of Bernard Sumner and Peter Hook of Joy Division fame counted among their devoted fans.

In 2017, after a long hiatus, the brand was revived by Barnes & Mullins with the help of guitar-builder extraordinaire Patrick James Eggle. The legendary British luthier was tasked with revamping the retro brand's catalogue for a modern audience and that's precisely what he did. With a contemporary version of the flagship Masquerader, a bold new take on a T-type with the Telstar and the guitar we are looking at today, the Provocateur, Shergold is back with a bang.

The Shergold Provocateur Standard SP12 is the most affordable singlecut in the lineup, but don't let its modest price tag fool you – this charming guitar offers a smorgasbord of contemporary features and tones.

The solid poplar body houses a duo of Page humbuckers, that are distinctly vintage in their output. The tone here is best described as woody – and ideal for expressive blues licks. Turn up the gain and you'll be greeted with a fabulous rock tone that could quite easily fill a stadium. Punchy, raw and coil-splittable, these pickups certainly took us by surprise.

Naturally, the vintage specs carry their way through to the neck. The solid Canadian maple neck opts for the comfortable 625.5mm scale length with a fairly chunky profile and medium jumbo frets – think '50s Les Paul but with bolt-on construction. Now, it has to be said that the satin finish here is impeccably smooth. This makes the guitar a pure joy to hold, something that's impressive at this price point. The gorgeously dark neck is topped with an equally shadowy Laurel fingerboard to complete the look.

Sitting proudly at the top of the neck is Shergold's paddle-style headstock, which forgoes the badge logo of the more expensive iteration in favour of mother-of-pearl detailing. A nice touch is the inclusion of locking machine heads. These tuners feel smooth and robust and are a nice added bonus to an already well-spec'd instrument.

Okay, so Shergold may not have the instant brand recognition of its peers, but that doesn't mean this revived guitar maker should be overlooked. Following in the footsteps of other resurrected vintage brands such as D'Angelico, Shergold is looking to find favour with a new modern audience – and when their guitars are this fun and engaging, we're sure they will.

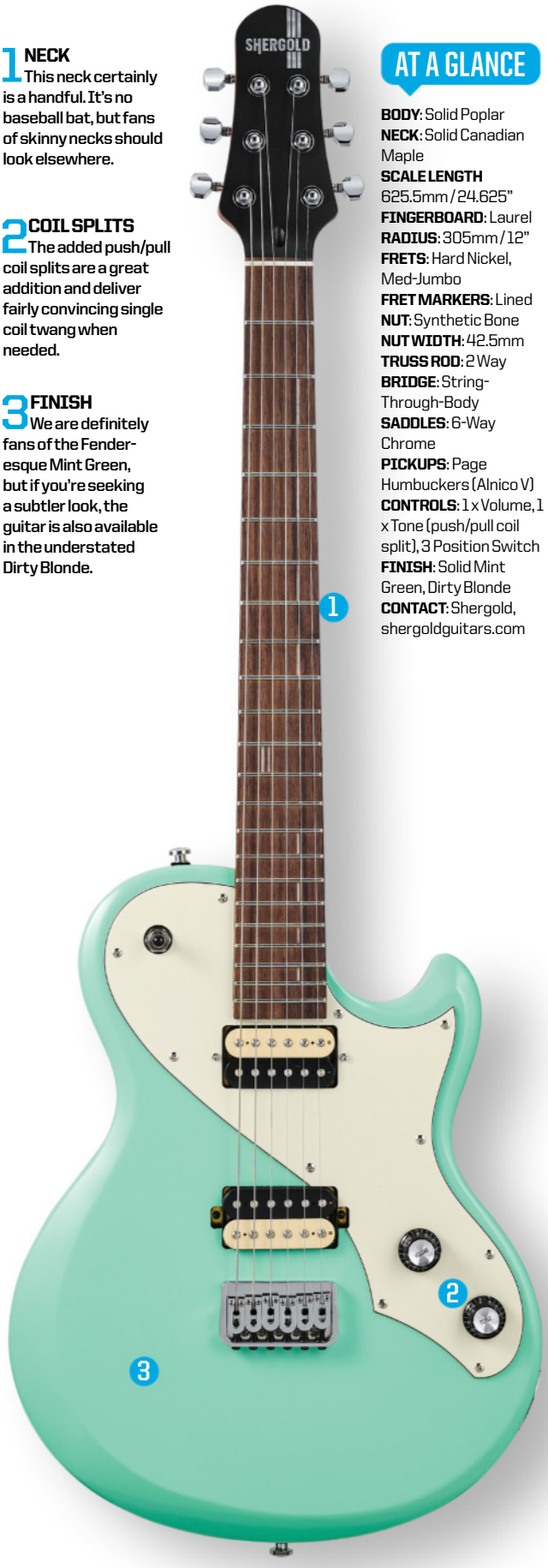
Daryl Robertson

SUMMARY	
FEATURES	★★★★★
SOUND QUALITY	★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★☆
PLAYABILITY	★★★★☆
OVERALL RATING	★★★★★

1 NECK
This neck certainly is a handful. It's no baseball bat, but fans of skinny necks should look elsewhere.

2 COIL SPLITS
The added push/pull coil splits are a great addition and deliver fairly convincing single coil twang when needed.

3 FINISH
We are definitely fans of the Fender-esque Mint Green, but if you're seeking a subtler look, the guitar is also available in the understated Dirty Blonde.



AT A GLANCE

BODY: Solid Poplar
NECK: Solid Canadian Maple
SCALE LENGTH 625.5mm / 24.625"
FINGERBOARD: Laurel
RADIUS: 305mm / 12"
FRETS: Hard Nickel, Med-Jumbo
FRET MARKERS: Lined
NUT: Synthetic Bone
NUT WIDTH: 42.5mm
TRUSS ROD: 2 Way
BRIDGE: String-Through-Body
SADDLES: 6-Way Chrome
PICKUPS: Page Humbuckers (Alnico V)
CONTROLS: 1 x Volume, 1 x Tone (push/pull coil split), 3 Position Switch
FINISH: Solid Mint Green, Dirty Blonde
CONTACT: Shergold, shergoldguitars.com

Photography Phil Barker

Sterling

STERLING BY MUSIC MAN ST. VINCENT GOLDIE

£1,099

A streamlined take on one of the most exciting guitar designs in recent memory

In 2016, Ernie Ball Music Man unveiled a guitar that was unlike anything else on the market – one so radical it's often cited as one of the most exciting guitar innovations of recent memory. That was the St. Vincent signature guitar, masterminded by Annie Clarke [aka St. Vincent herself] and debuting a new body shape. A more affordable version arrived from Sterling by Music Man soon after, but when an updated $3,000-priced Goldie was released in 2021, guitarists began to dream once again. Enter the equally radical but comfortably more affordable Sterling by Music Man Goldie, which – at least on the surface – carries all the aesthetic flair and tonal appointments of its pricier sibling…

There are some tweaks worth stating for the record. Here, nyatoh has been used for the body rather than okoume, and the premium tremolo of the original has been swapped out for a standard alternative. A roasted maple neck returns, though it's topped with a rosewood, rather than an ebony, fingerboard. So, a fairly sizeable shake-up, but not one that has compromised the instrument's performance. In fact, those comparisons are almost unfair: this is a smashing guitar in its own right.

It's always strange getting to grips with an unfamiliar guitar shape, but the Goldie somehow doesn't feel unfamiliar. It's very narrow, but the contours make it a pleasing playing companion that doesn't feel brittle when balancing on your knee. Owing to the nyatoh, the Goldie is light and has a nice snappiness. Pair that with an impeccably profiled neck and 12"-radius 'board, and you've got all the ingredients for an exceptional instrument.

It's a fun little thing to noodle with unplugged, but, of course, its potential is capped without an amplifier. Indeed, if the guitar itself feels like lightning in a bottle; that electricity is unleashed when plugged in. Gold foil pickups have been a bit of a 'thing' recently, but these are certainly here on merit. It becomes a different animal with a little fuzz, and anyone familiar with St. Vincent's repertoire – or gold foils in general – will be well prepared for this trio. The cleans are nice, too, and the five-way switch offers an array of chime-y and sludgy sounds, but this guitar really sings with a little overdrive.

As with all three-humbucker guitars, that pesky middle pickup can get in the way of strumming – and here, that 2/4 tuner design might not be for everyone – but that comes with the territory. To summarise: stick the EBMM logo on the headstock and without a close-up inspection we'd probably be fooled. A must-try for fans of guitars that push the boundaries of instrument design.

Matt Owen

SUMMARY	
FEATURES	★★★★½
SOUND QUALITY	★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
PLAYABILITY	★★★★½
OVERALL RATING	★★★★½

1 BODY
In a market flooded with Strats and single-cuts, the Goldie continues the rise of St. Vincent's radical design. Its small, but not too small, and inherently comfortable to handle.

2 PICKUPS
Gold foils are a load of fun, so stick 'em in a guitar that's as zany as this and you've got yourself the makings of a seriously powerful and versatile tone machine.

3 FEEL
The spec sheet has been tamed somewhat, but this still feels like playing lightning in a bottle: the neck is a breeze to navigate, and transforms completely when plugged in.

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Nyatoh
NECK: Roasted maple
SCALE LENGTH: 25.5"
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, custom St. Vincent inlays
FRETS: 22, narrow
PICKUPS: 3 x Gold Foil mini humbuckers
CONTROLS: 5-way pickup selector, master volume, master tone
HARDWARE: Vintage tremolo, locking tuners
FINISH: Cashmere, Velveteen
CONTACT: Sterling by Music Man, sterling bymusicman.com

Photography Phil Barker

MXR M309 JOSHUA AMBIENT ECHO

£269

Ambient soundscapes and practical delays in one box

The Joshua Ambient Echo serves up a tasty melange of multitap delays, reverb, modulation and octaves. Straightforward to use on the surface, it has extended versatility via easily-accessed secondary parameters.

Default operation is mono in/mono out but you can have stereo output or separate dry and wet outputs. The bypass footswitch doubles as a tap tempo switch and a rotary switch selects a rhythmic value for the repeats from a straight quarter note, dotted eighth note, eighth note, eighth note triplet and a double delay with an eighth note and dotted eighth. Double delay is actually possible for every setting as a dedicated button adds a second repeat – set by default as a quarter note but adjustable to a range of other values.

What all this gives you is a massive range of different multitap delays and plenty of opportunity to get some The Edge-style rhythms going if that's your thing. On top of that, you've a knob for adding floaty atmospheric modulation and a 'Voice' knob that adds in a mix of upper and lower octaves that can really enrich your trail of repeats and even mix in keyboard pad sounds. Reverb with adjustable decay and wet/dry mix cloaks it all with a real sense of space.

With all this sonic capability, the pedal is crying out for user memories that are not possible in its pedalboard-friendly chassis – maybe something for the future, MXR? You can, however, add an expression pedal and set up completely different sounds at heel and toe positions.

Spacey textural soundscapes ooze effortlessly from the pedal and it is the perfect tool for rhythmic tempo-synced repeat patterns, but it is equally adept at the sort of bread and butter 50ms to one-second delays that guitarists have been using for years, with repeats that are voiced out of the box to sit sweetly with guitar tone, extra dark/bright EQ adjustment being available if desired.

If a compact delay pedal is on your shopping list and you still haven't found what you're looking for, you seriously need to check the Joshua out.

Trevor Curwen

> "SPACEY TEXTURAL SOUNDS OOZE EFFORTLESSLY OUT"

SUMMARY	
FEATURES	★★★★★
PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
USABILITY	★★★★½
OVERALL	★★★★½

AT A GLANCE

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Delay pedal

FEATURES: True or Buffered (Trails) bypass, 50ms to 1000ms delay time, tap tempo, stereo output, adjustable low pass filter in the delay feedback

CONTROLS: Delay, Mod, Voice, Regen, Division, Mix, Echo 2 switch, Trails switch, CTR mode switch, Bypass footswitch

CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard TRS output, CTR input

POWER: Supplied 9V DC adaptor 250mA

DIMENSIONS: 64 (w) x 110 (d) x 50 mm (h)

Photo Olly Curtis

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Words Amit Sharma

KID KAPICHI

Having been invited to support the likes of Liam Gallagher, Royal Blood and Nothing But Thieves in the space of the last year or so, Hastings quartet Kid Kapichi are fast becoming one of the most exciting rock acts in Britain. "Opening for Liam at the Royal Albert Hall was easily one of the most prestigious gigs we've done," says guitarist and co-vocalist Ben Beetham. "Liam is a legend, we all knew it was a big moment. And touring with Nothing But Thieves taught us how to fill out big stages. We're finally out of the cage, running around doing Chuck Berry moves!"

Latest release *There Goes The Neighbourhood* is their third album in as many years and once again sees them fusing elements of punk and psychedelic rock into their own heady cocktail of noise. On songs like *Tamagotchi* and *Get Down*, they're splicing more conventional overdriven tones with highly effected synth-like structures, yielding some truly explosive results…

"We've started to lean more into the spacey stuff that goes side-by-side with the punk," continues Ben. "It's like hearing Queens Of The Stone Age and Guy Ritchie movies mixed together! So I'm now running a dual rig: there's a Line 6 Helix handling the wacky sounds running direct on one side and then I've got the mothership with the pedalboard and amps. I love finding the sweet spot between fizz and fatness, stumbling upon mad tones. It genuinely feels special, like you are privy to a moment that no one else will experience while alone in your room."

Ben's main weapon of choice is a 1952 Japanese Telecaster reissue made in 2009, which gets runs through Fender '65 Deluxe Reverb combo backed by a Marshall JTM cab, with more amps likely to be added in the near future. "I won't be subtracting – us guitar players hate throwing things away," laughs Ben. "Amp switching is a dream of mine. I want every frequency covered!"

On the pedalboard, you'll find a Visual Sound Double Trouble ("one side for the standard meat, the other to take it to the next level"), a Russian Big Muff clone ("it always makes an appearance"), plus the Electro-Harmonix Pitch Fork to add further depth where needed. There's also a POG2 with only the lower octave running through one of the sharper settings on the Q button, as heavily documented on previous recordings. For wetness, two Digitech Polara reverbs are employed, one set short and the other long. "It's the famously obnoxious Lexicon sound," grins Ben, adding: "You wouldn't think that side of the '80s has much of a place in our music, but it works!"

Photo Getty

ERNIE BALL

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